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[BRUIN TOTTERED BACKWARDS, AND FELL WITH A HEAVY THUD DOWN THE STAIRS!]

NOW AND FOR EVER.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

AN ABRUPT INTRODUCTION.

"Come here, Ellice, I want to talk to you," Lady Fitzeden said, as she closed her book, and leant back languidly in her cushioned chair.

She was not an old lady, but her hair had turned completely grey, and her refined face was very thin, with the pink and white complexion of fragile health.

Ellice came obediently, with Faus, her pet dog, in her arms, her bright, animated face half hidden by his curly hair.

She sat down on the step of the French window, opposite to Lady Fitzeden, and looked up in her mother's face with an expectant smile.

"Well, here I am."

"You must remember that you are no longer a child," Lady Fitzeden began, gravely.

Ellice nodded with mock solemnity.

"I will try to imagine that I'm eighty, and then slide down gracefully to eighteen."

"You always go to extremes," with a slight sigh, as if she were too weak to cope with the girl's exuberance of spirits. "If you will begin at eighteen, and remember that you are on the verge of womanhood—that is all I ask. I want you to make a good impression on your aunt, so you must take care not to be too flighty."

"I shall behave just as I do at home," Ellice said, with a toss of her head; "and if they don't like it, I will catch the first train and come back."

"They won't understand you as I do, silly child," smiling indulgently, "so you must be careful—that is all. Your whole future life may depend upon this visit."

"But I'm only going to be there for a month," her eyes opening wide, as if in sudden dismay; "and when I am back again, we shall go on just the same as ever."

"Very possibly; but I can't live for ever, and then——"

"Mother, don't talk like that," quickly, with a tremble about her lips.

"You must marry," Lady Fitzeden went on, quietly; "and if you like to choose your cousin, Arthur Standish, I don't think your aunt will object, and I fancy that it would be rather nice."

"I won't marry anybody," she cried, with flushed cheeks; "at least not till I'm quite—quite old, and then it might be comfortable."

Lady Fitzeden smiled.

"Who would have you, you absurd child? Men don't marry wrinkles and grey hair."

"I daresay I should be nicer than I am now. You always say the young are selfish and thoughtless, so I might be better when I grow old."

"And you might be worse," with a sad smile. "People don't always improve as they get old. The bad habits they have not controlled overmaster them, and control them in the end. Lord Woodbridge's brother Wentworth took to drinking when he was quite young—the whole family remonstrated

BRITISH MUSEUM

with him, but nothing would induce him to give it up. I really don't think he could after a time; it mastered him to such an extent he died of delirium tremens. Now I shouldn't like you to marry a son of his, for I am a firm believer in heredity, and I believe that sort of curse is sure to descend from one generation to another."

"But, mother, that would be too cruel—I can't believe it. It would not be just for anyone to be born into certain misery."

"I don't say that each in his turn would be unable to cure himself. I only think he would be born with the craving—though, by Heaven's grace, and his own earnest endeavour, he might conquer it. However, we needn't trouble ourselves about that. And as to your marrying, child, I am in no hurry for it. I don't want to get rid of you," with a pathetic smile; "only when you do choose a husband, let him be a good man, and come of a good stock."

"Perhaps a good man won't choose me," Ellice answered, with a sparkle of irrepressible fun in her eyes. "I am not always singing hymns or reading tracts."

"No one but a sanctimonious prig would wish you to do so; and I don't think a prig would be likely to take to a mad-cap like you."

And then, with a sudden change of subject, Lady Fitzeden began to talk of the girl's frocks and furbelows, for she was anxious that her darling should present a good appearance at the Castle. Much money had not been expended on them, but Ellice was quite delighted with them, for they were fresh, tasteful, and pretty, and she did not care to outrival everyone else by a heap of gorgeous garments. She was much excited about this visit to Woodbridge Castle, for she had lived very quietly in her Somersetshire home, and she was now for the first time to make her *début* in the great world.

But when all her trunks were packed, and the carriage came to the door to take her away to the station, her courage began to fail.

It was with a very serious face that she bade good-bye to Tibbits, her mother's faithful maid, when she handed in her bundle of wraps which looked more fitted for a country journey in snow and frost, than a summer expedition in glorious sunshine. And the tears actually ran down her cheeks as she kissed her mother again and again on the platform, and told her that she would be back very soon, very soon indeed, and she hoped that Cousin Carrie would take the greatest care of her.

"Mind, if you want me you must send for me at once," she said, earnestly, as she put her head out of the window of a first-class carriage, and knocked her new hat into a strangely crooked position.

"I shall make a point of not wanting you a bit," Lady Fitzeden assured her with a fond smile. "Be careful, darling, that your spirits don't run away with you; and write to me as often as you can."

Then the engine gave a parting scream, every open door was closed with a loud bang, and Lady Fitzeden, a tall, aristocratic figure with a gentle face, was left on the platform, whilst Ellice, who was leaning out of the window, in spite of the ghastly story of the poor man who had his head chopped off in consequence of doing so, was carried farther and farther away to meet the new life which was waiting for her, with all its new hopes and its fine promises of pleasure.

Ellice found it difficult to settle down to reading the book which she had brought with her. She could not fix her thoughts on the woes and sorrows of a fictitious heroine, whilst she was longing for adventures on her own account.

If something would only happen—a little accident to the train which should not damage her a bit, but should give her an opportunity of displaying her courage—that courage which she never doubted, although it had never been tried—or anything else, not too tragic or disagreeable, which would help her to write an amusing letter to her dear mother.

That letter she had already begun to compose, although it was only about an hour since she had parted from her, when the door was abruptly opened and she was told that she had to change. This took her by surprise, and she hurried out of the train with all her wraps and packages, as if it were going off that instant by express speed.

The guard acted up to the instructions of Lady Fitzeden, gave her trunks into the charge of a porter, and her pretty person into the care of another guard as important as himself, who put her into an empty carriage, and assured her that no one should disturb her.

It was a great amusement to her to watch the crowd on the platform, now that she was safe out of its reach.

An excursion train had just come in, and excited females were rushing about and getting in everyone's way, clamouring for lost parcels, or perhaps lost children; whilst babies cried, men ran in and out of the refreshment-room, and boys with vigorous lungs shouted "Ta ra-ra-boom-dray" at the top of their shrill voices.

Bells rang, engines puffed, porters ran at wandering would-be passengers, and drove them to their places like a flock of sheep; but still, for some reason, they could not get off.

Just as the train for Woodbridge began to show signs of latent activity, the door of Ellice's carriage was wrenched open, and a man tumbled head foremost into it, as if he had been shot from the mouth of a gun.

"I beg your pardon—hope I haven't damaged you; but that was a shave," he gasped, as he took off his straw hat and wiped his forehead.

There was something so pleasant in his manner that Ellice, who had been rather startled by his abrupt entry, was completely reassured.

"If your foot had slipped you might have been killed," she said, gravely.

She meant no harm, but her mother would certainly have told her that she ought not to be talking to a stranger.

"You are quite right," he said, cordially; "but it would have been an awful nuisance to miss the train. The most virtuous people under the sun hate you, if you arrive too late for dinner."

"Then I hope I shall be in time," she said, fervently.

"You are going to Woodbridge Castle?" he asked, or rather exclaimed, in surprise, as his quick blue eyes caught the address on the label of her rugs. "Jove! that's a queer coincidence."

"Do you know it?" she asked, as eagerly as if she had been going to a strange country, and wanted information concerning it.

"Rather. I live there," he said, quietly. "That is to say, off and on. It is more my home than any other spot in the world."

"Then you must be my cousin, Arthur Standish," she said, as the colour rushed into her cheeks, and her heart—that young volatile heart—began to beat fast with excitement.

"Arthur Wentworth Standish," he said, with a low bow and a pleasant smile, "very much at your service. So you are Ellice Fitzeden, the young lady whom I was to be sure and find out at Woodbridge, and put safely into the brougham. Suppose we shake hands on the strength of it."

He extended a sunburnt but well-shaped hand as he spoke, and took her small one for a moment in his firm grasp, looking down into her flushed face with kind but scrutinising eyes.

He looked so honest and true that she felt sure they would be good friends; but her mother's words came back to her remembrance most inopportunely, and tied her usually voluble tongue, whilst her long thick lashes drooped shyly on her burning cheeks.

She would have given anything to be able to say something suitable in return, but the power seemed to have deserted her, and she was certain that her new cousin must be thinking her a little fool.

CHAPTER II.

JUST LIKE A BROTHER.

"My dear niece, you are most heartily welcome," Lord Woodbridge said, with evident sincerity, as he came to meet her in the large hall which made her all at once feel small and insignificant. He kissed her affectionately as if he had known her all her short young life, and then turned to her companion with a cordial smile,—

"That's right, Bruin," he said heartily. "I told my wife that you were certain to come up to time. It is a blessing to be able to depend upon a fellow as I can on you. There's your cousin, you know, safe to miss a train or disappoint you somehow. I doubt if you could find his equal at that sort of thing."

"When a man is popular people are always clutching hold of him," Standish said, good-naturedly, for he was always ready to defend the absent.

"Well, come into the library and have some tea."

Lord Woodbridge led the way, and the others followed. As he threw open the door Ellice hesitated for a moment on the threshold, for she was dismayed at the buzz of voices, and looked with hesitation at the crowded room before her. A lady, tall and very handsome, beautifully dressed in black silk trimmed with grey, detached herself from the rest and came forward with a winning smile.

"Dear child! I am so glad to see you," she said, kissing the pretty face that was so shyly lifted to hers. "Are you dreadfully tired after your hot journey? And how is your dear mother? So good of her to spare you. Come and have a cup of tea; I told them to keep some for you, as I was sure you would be dying of thirst. Ah, Bruin! there you are; you never tell us," her face lighting up with pleasure and affection, as she raised it for Arthur Standish to kiss on both cheeks.

"No, he always comes back like a dog to his bone," remarked a girl with a pale face, a very good profile, and a waist of eighteen inches.

"Thanks, Emily; you have always something nice to say to me," he said, quietly, with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

"My dear boy, it doesn't do for everyone to spoil you," Lady Woodbridge said, with a sharp glance at Emily Lennard. "I hope you took care of Ellice on the way."

"After the first, when I nearly knocked her over," he said, with an amused smile. "I had a shave of missing the train, and jumped into the carriage as if I had been shot from a catapult."

"Where was that?" Miss Lennard asked, with evident curiosity.

"At Horchester," shortly, as if for some reason he would have preferred not to answer it.

"Then you were staying with the Singletons?" she exclaimed, as if she had made an important discovery.

"I was. Have you any objection?" looking down at her with a strange sternness in his eyes, which brought the colour slowly into her pale cheeks.

"Not the slightest. Why should I?" with a scornful little laugh.

"Exactly, why should you?" very quietly, but with the sort of calm that precedes a storm.

"As long as you don't ask me to accompany you," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I am not in the habit of inviting you or anybody else to other people's houses. When I do, you can always refuse."

"Dear me, how solemn we are," with a mocking smile. "Wasn't it you that sug-

gested that Ellice Fitzeden should be asked to Woodbridge?"

Arthur Standish looked round to be sure that they could not be overheard, and, seeing that Ellice had been taken to the tea-table by Lady Woodbridge, he replied, in a low tone,—

"I believe I did suggest it."

"Why did you do it?" she asked, almost fiercely.

"Why not? A pretty little girl is always an acquisition for a country house."

"She was brought here to be married, and you know it," she said, in a low rasping tone.

"No, by Heaven, such an idea never entered my head," he exclaimed, with a startled look in his blue eyes.

"You look innocence itself, but of course I don't believe you."

"I swear it," he said, vehemently. "Perhaps you believe me now?"

Without answering, she announced carelessly that she was going to dress for dinner. Other people seemed inclined to dawdle, but she detested to be hurried.

Evidently she had managed to rouse an unpleasant train of thought, for Standish remained standing where she had left him, with an annoyed expression on his usually cheerful face.

A man with iron-grey hair, and thoroughly white moustaches, who had been watching him for some time, came up to him and slapped him on the back. "That girl," he said in a low voice, "is as sharp and as cold-blooded as a weasel. She would worm the heart out of any man, and then tear it to pieces with her small white teeth!"

"She won't get a chance with mine, I can tell you, for she'll never be within a hundred miles of it, so to speak," Arthur said, confidently.

"Then she will get at you through somebody else, through the first girl whom you happen to like better than anyone else, for instance," the Baronet replied, with equal confidence.

"But why, Sir Thomas?" Bruin asked in surprise. "Miss Lennard hates me as a weasel would hate a fox-terrier!"

"Jealousy, my dear boy. If you had chosen to kneel at her feet she might have kicked you with her delicate shoe, but she would have liked you a vast deal better," the old gentleman said, with a chuckle.

"I'd see myself somewhere first," with energy.

"Ha, ha! It's very amusing to look on; but I must go and make myself presentable."

"And so must I," rejoined Standish; and they went out of the room together.

To Ellice Fitzeden it seemed rather a formidable affair to face the large company assembled in the drawing-room; but she told herself that she had to do it, so there was no use in putting it off.

She looked very nice in a simple white Surah frock with a gold sash, and her rippling gold-brown hair coiled like a crown round her shapely head; but she had no one to tell her how nice she looked, for the faithful Tibbits had been left at home; and Miss Lennard, who came to fetch her at Lady Woodbridge's suggestion, only gave her a careless glance, and remarked, "Sweet simplicity" in a scornful tone, as she swept on before her, her long train rustling as she went. She stopped at the drawing-room door, and looked back over her shoulder with a peculiar smile.

"One friendly warning I will give you," she said in a low voice: "fall in love with anybody on earth rather than a Standish. There will be no happiness for you if you do."

"I shan't fall in love with anybody?" she said, defiantly, as her cheeks grew hot, and she threw back her head. Just then Miss Lennard threw open the door, and Ellice's words were overheard by Sir Thomas Esmond who was standing close by. He turned round with a glance of intense amusement.

"You must have been taking all our characters away, Miss Lennard."

"Oh dear no, I don't think they are worth the trouble. We all begin by saying we won't do a thing, and start it in half-an-hour."

"Then your young friend will have to be quick about it. Please introduce me before the catastrophe happens."

"Sir Thomas Esmond—Miss Fitzeden," she said carelessly, and walked on.

"I knew your mother, my dear, but I can't say you are bit like her," and he put up his eye glass to study Ellice's sweet face at his leisure.

"No, I know I'm not," she said, ruefully, "but I would rather be like her than anybody on earth."

"You've done quite right—you've started a pattern of your own," he said, with an approving nod. "Couldn't have managed better."

"Oh, Sir Thomas, but everyone says my mother was lovely?" with raised eyebrows.

"And what do they say of Miss Fitzeden?" he asked, mischievously.

"That she is to go in to dinner with this dear boy," interposed Lady Woodbridge, as she brought up Arthur Wentworth Standish.

"We are quite old friends by this time, are we not, cousin mine?" he said, cheerfully, looking handsome and particularly gentlemanly in his evening things, as he offered her his arm.

"I know you better than anyone else in the house!" she said, with a glad ring in her fresh young voice.

"And the more you know of me, the more you must like me, promise me that," he whispered, as he looked straight into her clear eyes.

"How can I tell?" she answered, with a flutter in her heart.

"You must like me without knowing why," he said, as he took his place beside her at the long table with its shaded lamps and exquisite flowers, "and I can easily teach you how."

And he did teach her with fatal facility; for before she had reached the end of that dinner with its many courses, she had decided from the shallow depths of her short experience, that this Arthur Standish was the very nicest man she had ever met in her life.

He drew her out to talk of her home, and asked many questions about her mother—a theme on which she was always ready to dilate. She told him exactly how they spent their days, not in the bustle of the world, but with plenty of kind friends round them to give them a taste of pleasant society and all the pleasures it involved.

"And then it is so nice, after I've been to a picnic, or a tennis party, or a dance, to come back to mother and tell her all about it," she said, with shining eyes. "She is just as interested as if she were a girl herself."

"It must be good to have a mother like that," he said, earnestly, as if there were a great envy in his heart as well as a deep regret.

"Lady Woodbridge seems so delightfully kind," she said, with some surprise which she did not like to express.

"And so she is—an angel without wings," he answered, fervently, with a kindly glance towards the Viscountess at the head of the table. "What she has been to me all these years nobody could guess. If I'm anything at all to boast of, I owe it all to her."

"Then you are almost as fortunate as I am," she said, gladly.

"With a difference," and there was a sadness in his smile which puzzled her.

Just then she happened to look round at Miss Lennard, who was having rather up-hill work in trying to amuse a well-known M.P., who seemed to be too much absorbed in his thoughts to attend to anyone else.

She gave Ellice Fitzeden a perfectly malevolent glance, which chilled the poor girl's lightheartedness.

"I wonder why Miss Lennard dislikes me so much," she said, in a low voice, as she turned away with something like a shudder.

"Shall I tell you?" Bruin said, quietly. "If your nose had been crooked, and your eyes green, she would have liked you well enough."

"How absurd you are," she answered with a happy laugh. "Oh, how glad I am that you did not miss that train."

"Not half as glad as I am. You must treat me just like a brother. If anything goes wrong with you, you must let me know at once. Mind you don't forget!"

"I am sure, I shan't forget," looking up into his eyes with perfect confidence shining out of her own. "I shall be very thankful for a word of advice. I've never been away from home without my mother before, and I shall miss her so."

"But you've never had a brother before, so there's something to the good," he said, as if there might be infinite consolation in the suggestion.

And so there was plenty of consolation, but plenty of danger as well; for an amateur brother can never be like a real one. He may seem much nearer for a time; but then, there is always the chance that he may be ever so much farther off when you have grown accustomed to him.

CHAPTER III.

"NOW AND FOR EVER!"

One happy day followed another, and Ellice Fitzeden felt as if the hours were flying by on golden wings.

She did not know that all her happiness sprang from the fact that Arthur Standish was under the same roof with her, and always looked after her like the kindest of brothers; but Lady Fitzeden guessed it from the tone of her glowing letters.

She read them with a smile and a sigh—a smile, because in her unselfishness she rejoiced to think that her daughter would be happily married before she died—a tear, because she knew that her life would seem dull indeed without her little sunbeam.

It was nice to be telling all her friends, in answer to their eager questions, that Ellice was enjoying herself so very, very much.

The Rev. Charles Belmont, the grey-haired Rector, who had baptised her as a baby, and confirmed her in the first years of her innocent girlhood, looked grave when Lady Fitzeden told him cheerfully that Ellice had become great friends with Lord Woodbridge's son, Arthur Standish. He shook his head gravely over the news when he was alone with his wife.

"My dear Charles, I think it would be a capital thing. Ellice is such a darling, dainty little creature, I should like her to be the future Lady Woodbridge," she said placidly, as she knitted a pink sock for her last baby.

"And I would rather see her in her grave," he said, with a sudden flush on his withered cheek, as he stood by the window looking out on to the flower-garden.

"Good gracious! what has he done?" she exclaimed, in startled surprise, as she dropped her knitting-needle on the floor, and stared at her husband with wide-open eyes.

"He is a thoroughly bad fellow—rotten to the core. There are plenty just like him in society, and if I had my way, I'd root them out ruthlessly," he said sternly.

"But how could you, dear? You can't dig up a man and throw him away like a bad potato!"

"No; but I could shut my doors against him."

"Then he would only go from bad to worse."

"It would make him uncomfortable, and then he would see that wickedness didn't pay."

"Poor Lord and Lady Woodbridge!" sighed the kind soul. "And I was only thinking, whilst Lady Fitzeden was talking of the parties and festivities going on down there, how nice it would be to live in a Castle, with plenty of money to give away, as well as to pay the butcher's bill."

"The irony of fate!" said the Rector grimly. "Woodbridge has everything that he can desire, except the one, and the loss of that one spoils all the rest."

Whilst these kind friends were indulging in gloomy forebodings, Ellice was enjoying herself to her heart's content. And this was literally true, for she asked nothing more than to have Arthur Wentworth Standish by her wherever she went, and she had this desire fulfilled to the uttermost. A fortnight passed in a constant round of pleasure, only broken by the Sundays, which were also very pleasant in a quieter sort of way.

It had been a dull rainy day, at which many people had grumbled; but they had amused themselves as best they could with music in one room, billiards in another, and gossip in a third; whilst they were all looking forward to the dance in the evening, which Lady Woodbridge had promised them, as a kind of preliminary canter before the grand ball for the following night.

Ellice expected to enjoy herself immensely, but the reality rarely comes up to the ideal; and though she had plenty of partners, there was a feeling of dissatisfaction in her heart, because Brain had been called out of the room early in the evening, and had never appeared again.

"Poor little forsaken thing!" Emily Lennard said mockingly, tapping her on the shoulder with her red feather fan. "What did I tell you? Find consolation with somebody else!"

"I don't want consolation," Ellice said, angrily, her delicate face flushing hotly at the unkind imputation.

"But I do," said a laughing voice close at her elbow, and turning quickly round she saw the very man she had been wishing for. Her heart gave a leap, her eyes shone joyously, but she said not a word, because Emily Lennard was watching them both with eager eyes.

"Poor Ellice has been humbly waiting for you the whole evening," she said, maliciously. "You really should not have stayed away so long."

"I've been doing nothing of the sort," exclaimed Ellice, indignantly. "I have danced every dance without missing one."

"Without missing me, you mean to say," put in Arthur, lightly, "you must be punished for that at once;" and, as the music struck up at the same moment, he whirled her into the middle of a waltz without waiting for her consent. And when that waltz was over, he led her away to a quiet nook where a seat was arranged at the end of the conservatory.

He walked fast, as if anxious to get out of the cheerful, chattering, noisy throng, but he did not speak until he placed her on the couch, and dropped down into the seat by her side. Then he put his arm along the back of the couch, and bent over her with a look of intense longing in his eyes.

The silence seemed all the deeper out there among the feathery palms, in the twilight, for the noise of laughter and music in the brilliantly lighted rooms. The girl's heart was throbbing, the colour coming and going in her soft cheeks.

A feeling of expectation was upon her, and yet she could not have told you what she did expect, or what she was waiting for. Her whole nature seemed to be thrilling in affinity with his; and he watched her in her innocence, feeling that here was the one pure-hearted girl whom he had been waiting for since he had left his boyhood behind him.

Why should he pass on, and leave her for someone else? he asked himself, passionately; telling himself in answer that he would die first. And then, as the rain pattered on the panes, and the music played the sad sweet music of a new waltz called "Never More," he whispered, softly,—

"My little darling!" and his arm slid down from the back of the seat and clasped her slight waist; and his head bent lower till his golden moustaches brushed her blushing cheeks.

She said nothing, but her bosom heaved; and she shook from head to foot, as a great shyness seized her, and her long lashes seemed fastened to her cheeks.

"Tell me this one thing, child," he said, earnestly, as he remembered he had only known her for one brief fortnight out of the eighteen years of her life. "Is there anyone else you care for more than me?"

"Oh, no—no—no!" she said, breathlessly.

"Could you love me now and for ever?"

"For ever," she answered, softly, in all the joyous confidence of her young heart.

Then he drew her closer to him, and kissed her sunny hair; and they were both as happy as two birds in the radiant spring. But the music grew sadder and sadder till it almost sounded like a wail, and the rain beat against the glass as if it meant to shatter it to atoms.

Quick steps came through the adjoining room, so Brain in a moment sat bolt upright, and Ellice hid her roseate face behind her fan. They proved to be Miss Lennard's, and she cast a sharper glance than ever at the two whom she came in search of.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," she said, in an annoyed tone. "Lady Woodbridge wants us to practise the cotillion, so you must come at once."

"All right, we will dance till all's blue," he said, cheerfully; "come, Ellice, we'll show them how to do it."

"We shall want experienced dancers, not novices," Emily said, superciliously.

"The novices will be experienced dancers by to-morrow. Don't you put yourself out, Emily."

"I am put out by the rain. Such an awful nuisance."

"It really doesn't matter a bit. We are all under shelter."

"Yes, but to be cooped in here," she said, biting her lip.

"Plenty of room to move about in; but if you want more space, you must put on a mackintosh and some galoshes."

"How ridiculous you are!" she said, pettishly.

By this time they had reached the dancing-room, and directly he got there Arthur Standish gave a sharp look round it, as if looking for somebody else.

All the while he was dancing with a bewildering change of partners, he kept a watch on the door; but evidently the man or the woman did not come through it. As soon as they had danced a few rounds, Lady Woodbridge proposed that they should leave off and go to bed, so as to be quite fresh for the morrow, and Arthur seconded her with an eagerness that surprised most people.

"Good-night, dear," Lady Woodbridge said, kindly, as she kissed Ellice's bright face.

"Dear Lady Woodbridge, how tired you look," she exclaimed, compassionately, as she noticed an unusually worn expression about her eyes.

"The wet day, put it all on the shoulders of the weather," and she turned away with a heavy sigh.

There was an atmosphere of sadness and anxiety that evening which many people were conscious of; but Ellice, though of an unselfish and sympathetic nature, was so engrossed for once in her own great happiness, that she felt nothing of it, and even found it difficult not to lift up her voice and sing aloud as she went up to bed.

She had found the nicest man in the world to love, and what gave the crowning touch to her happiness was the thought that he had been specially selected by her own dear mother.

Oh! Heaven had been very kind to her, and she must try to be as good as possible to show that she deserved it.

The last thing before she got into bed she drew the curtain aside and peeped out. She was surprised to find that the rain had stopped, and that the stars were shining dimly.

As it had grown much warmer, she leaned out for a breath of air, and was just drawing in her head when she heard a voice, which she recognised as Emily Lennard's, say distinctly,—

"Come out boldly, and assert your own rights."

"I am here for that very purpose."

Could it be possible that it was Arthur—Arthur Standish—out there on the terrace, holding a secret midnight interview with Emily Lennard, a girl whom he had always pretended to dislike? Impossible, and yet it was his voice, undoubtedly his voice. Oh! what could this mystery mean?

"I suppose I must make love to this little Fitzeden girl," he went on, unconscious of the small white figure up above, who listened with burning cheeks and hands clasped tight together, and a heart growing colder at each word, "that is part of the programme, I understand."

"Part of the original programme, I believe," answered Emily; "but she has fallen head over ears in love with someone else. So you are too late, as usual."

"I don't care a hang!" he said, frankly, and the words, though spoken in a low voice, seemed to ring through poor little Ellice's ears. "Now give us a kiss, and say good-night. 'Pon my word, I'm as sleepy as a dormouse."

Their steps moved off to a side-door, and Ellice crept into bed with an almost breaking heart. Her pride helped her to bear it bravely.

If he could talk of making love to her as a pretence, if he could say that he did not "care a hang" whether he was too late or not, if he could kiss another girl in that rough, ungentlemanly way, the Arthur Standish whom she had loved for a fortnight could never have existed except in her own imagination; and, oh! how empty the world seemed suddenly to have become!

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW ARTHUR.

It had been agreed the evening before, that if the weather were agreeable Arthur Wentworth Standish and Ellice Fitzeden should go up the river in a light boat, to pick some tall rushes which were needed for decorating a large fire-place in the hall. But the next morning Arthur hunted high and low, and all in vain, for Ellice was nowhere to be found; so after waiting about for nearly an hour he asked a pleasant young fellow, named Charlie Spencer, to accompany him, and went off in a huff.

Meanwhile Ellice had escaped from the house just after breakfast, and hidden herself in a wood where no one would think of looking for her. She could have been very happy all by herself, if she had only been able to think of Standish as she had thought of him a few short hours before; but now everything was changed, and she threw herself down on ferns and hare-bells, and hid her face on the ground. She was too proud to cry, so she had no relief from tears; but she longed to have her mother's arms about her, and her sweet consoling voice in her ears.

Poor child! she felt as if she could never trust anyone again, never like anyone again, and she walked back through the shrubbery with a lagging step, and a sad face with an expression of careworn age on it, which looked out of place on her blooming youth.

Still she made a pretty picture, coming along through the lights and shadows, with a bunch of wild flowers in her hand, and a tall young man, in a suit of brown clothes, who was standing by a tree trying to light his pipe, evidently thought so; for he desisted from his operations, took his hat off, and stepped straight in front of her.

"My little cousin, charmed to make your acquaintance," and he took her hand, flowers and all, and shook it heartily.

"I don't know who you are," she said slowly, rather inclined to think he was an impostor.

"You are Ellice Fitzeden, and I am Arthur Standish."

"No," she interrupted quickly, with an accent of scorn in her fresh young voice, "you can't take me in like that. I know him," her lips trembled, her voice changed. "At least, I used to know him very well."

"And you did not know that there were two of us, both of the same name, only Bruin has a Wentworth thrown in to make a difference?"

"No, I never heard of the other," she said slowly.

"I call Bruin 'the other,' but that's just a matter of fancy. He is a capital fellow, ready to take everybody else's burden upon himself, and I suppose you are 'gone' on him like the rest of the girls?" he asked, with his jaded eyes fixed on her blushing face.

She drew herself up with the quiet dignity of insulted youth.

"He was very kind to me when I first came, that is all."

"Then you are heart-whole, you wish me to understand?" he persisted as he walked on by her side.

"Of course I am," impatiently, with an unveracity born of the trying moment, "but I don't see how it can matter to you."

"You don't, but I do. Why should it be so utterly impossible for you to like one cousin as much as another?"

She looked up into his face with a speculating gaze. This Arthur Standish was good-looking, with a straight nose, dark eyes, set rather close together, a small dark moustache, and a complexion almost as white as his shirt-collar. There was something in his expression which made her shiver with distrust and disgust, and she quickened her steps in her anxiety to get rid of him.

"You have not answered my question."

"Oh! because you are so utterly different," she said, carelessly.

"Yes, as sin and saintliness. When you've had enough of the one, you will then take to the other. In other words, when you are tired of Bruin, you will go back to me."

"No, I shall go home," she said, with a determined shake of her head; and then, as they emerged from the shrubbery, she hurried across the wide lawn.

"There is the gong and I shall be late."

"One moment. I suppose you've given the first dance to Bruin?"

"No, I haven't," without looking round.

"Then give it to me."

"If you like."

It was not a gracious way of accepting, but her heart was so sore at the remembrance of what that dance would have been for her but for that conversation on the terrace, that she did not care who had it.

"Child, you've been tiring yourself out!" Lady Woodbridge said with her kind, motherly smile, as she made room for Ellice at her side.

The new Arthur Standish took his place at the bottom of the table, and had Emily Lennard on his left hand.

She was muffled up round her neck, having caught cold the night before; but that did not prevent her from talking fast to her neighbour.

He, however, scarcely took the trouble to answer her; but his dark eyes travelled down the whole length of the table till they rested on Ellice's flower-like face, and seemed inclined to stay there.

Ellice, in her first shy glance round, found that Bruin was absent as well as the Viscount and Mr. Spencer.

After that a stolid indifference to everything took possession of her, and she would have sat in solemn silence if it had not been for Sir Thomas.

He teased her about her abstraction, which he put down to a far more cheerful cause than the real one; and asked her in a low voice whether she liked Arthur Standish as well as the other. "Not half such a good fellow; but don't say I said so," he almost whispered, as he poured some claret into her glass.

He told her to drink it in order that she might get a few roses into her cheeks for the evening.

All that afternoon they were busy decorating the hall and the reception-rooms with banks of flowers. There was so much to be done that the gardeners were very glad to accept the help of ladies and gentlemen.

Bruin never appeared, having gone into Croydon on some business for Lord Woodbridge, directly he and Mr. Spencer had commenced a late luncheon on their return from their expedition up the river; but Ellice found the other Arthur always at her elbow, ready to help in placing exquisite La France or William Allen Richardson roses on a bank of moss and fern.

The more she saw of him the less she liked him, and she was quite angry with herself for having promised him the first dance.

Fortunately, Charlie Spencer was rather enamoured of her, and kept hovering close at hand, as did Emily Lennard also, who made remarks as pointed as the thorns of the roses.

Standish paid her small attention, and barely heard her requests for a bit of string or a pair of scissors, whilst he was trying his best to forestall all Ellice's wants.

If she had not felt so utterly depressed she would have enjoyed the fun of all the preparations; but, at least, she had sufficient occupation in snubbing this intrusive cousin, who seemed to think himself master of the house and all in it.

There was to be a hurried dinner in the hall at half-past seven in order to leave the ladies plenty of time to array themselves for the ball.

As they were seated at dinner Bruin walked in, and stood for a moment in the doorway with the sunlight on his fair head, as his blue eyes roamed eagerly round the table.

"So sorry to be late; but that beastly lawyer kept me waiting for hours. I'll run and wash my hands."

"No, no, sit down as you are. We've no time for ceremony," Sir Thomas called out, cheerily. "You're just in time for fish; but you've lost the soup."

He slipped into the first empty chair, which happened to be next Miss Lennard, but he sent a frank smile straight across the table to Ellice, accompanied with a loving look, which seemed like an insult after what she had heard last night.

She gave him a chilly little smile in return, which seemed like a slap in the face to him; and she was conscious of the surprised look he gave her, though her eyes were fixed in another direction.

He tried to speak to her when dinner was over, so she ran upstairs to avoid him; but he was not a man to be easily baffled. He hurried up three steps at a time by another staircase, and came face to face with her in the broad gallery.

Holding out both hands, he said, reproachfully,—

"Haven't you a word for me, darling?"

"Never call me that again!" and she drew up her slight figure with the air of a queen, taking no notice of his outstretched hands.

"What do you mean?" he asked, in amazement, with as much surprise as if a dove had flown at him. "Think of last night!"

"I do think of it," she said, bitterly. "Oh, why—why did you take the trouble to deceive me?"

"I'd rather cut off my right hand," earnestly. "Ellice, you know it. You told me last night——"

"Don't mention last night!" she cried, passionately. "Oh, I wish to Heaven I had never seen you!"

"Somebody has been making mischief," and he frowned darkly.

"No, nobody but yourself," shaking her head, sorrowfully.

"What have I done?" raising his eyebrows. "I've scarcely seen you the whole day. You deserted me this morning."

"And for a very good reason!"

"Yes, it was disappointing—wasn't it?" cried a mocking voice close beside them; and looking round in surprise, they saw Emily Lennard standing at the door of her bedroom.

Ellice gave her one indignant glance, into which she threw all the bitterness of her soul, and fled to her own room, whilst Bruin turned round and confronted Miss Lennard with flashing eyes.

"Be good enough to explain," he said, curtly.

"With pleasure," and she made him a mocking curtsey. "Miss Ellice Fitzeden lost her heart willingly to Lord Woodbridge's son-and-heir; but she is very loth to let it go to his cousin."

"I don't understand," and he flushed hotly. "To my certain knowledge, she never saw him till this morning."

"Oh, blind as a bat!" she cried, incredulously. "Didn't you see that she took you for the other Arthur all the while?"

"No; by Heaven! I never thought of it."

"She was disillusioned in Harper's Wood this very morning, and you see the result."

She watched the healthy colour die out of his face with cruel satisfaction. This man was more honoured and esteemed than the one she loved; and it was an open secret that Lord and Lady Woodbridge would have given half their fortune to be able to place their nephew in the position of their son; and, therefore, she hated him.

It was also a delight to her to make mischief between him and Ellice, because she knew that the Viscountess had cherished a dream that Lady Fitzeden's daughter should redeem her unfortunate son from the error of his ways.

"She is so young," he said, hoarsely, "and, dash it all! I'm not a pauper," throwing back his head. "I think a Standish can hold h own with anyone."

"You forget that a girl loves bonbons, plaything, and—titles. I must go and dress," and with another low, mocking laugh she disappeared into her own room.

He walked away slowly, bewildered and enraged. He distrusted Emily Lennard entirely, but he had seen with his own eyes that Ellice was changed, and what else could have changed her? There was no other reason why she should turn against him; and as he watched her that evening dancing with his cousin, smiling into his face as she had smiled up into his own the evening before—he ground his teeth savagely, as he learnt the shortness and the futility of a girl's "for ever."

There were many other girls who were only too glad to dance with him, for he was immensely popular in the county. If the ball were a success it was owing to his exertions, for he introduced the plain girls as well as the pretty ones, brought forward shy men, and even saw that the dowagers were not allowed to starve.

Ellice was the acknowledged belle of the ball; she was dressed in white mousseline de soie, with pearls round her soft, white throat, and a pearl star amongst her brown curls. She had found a waterfall bouquet of white roses in her room, but she had left them upstairs to wither alone; for she knew that they came from Bruin, and she did not choose to wear his roses.

She danced the first dance with the son of the house. Lady Woodbridge smiled at her gladly, as she whirled past, and a bright hope shot up in the mother's heart. Perhaps this pure, true hearted girl had an angel's mission on earth, and her own constant anxieties would be ended for ever.

"Are you beginning to like me better?" Arthur Standish asked, when the waltz was over.

"You dance very well," she said, evasively.

"Do you know what we will do later on? We'll cut the whole concern, and go out in a boat. Wouldn't you like the moonlight better than this awful crowd?"

"I don't think Lady Woodbridge would like it. She would wonder where I was."

"Let her wonder. She has often wondered where I was, when I've chosen to keep dark. If you had looked out of your window last night——"

"But I did," she interrupted eagerly.

"Ah! then I'll say no more."

"But tell me—tell me!" as a sudden, wild hope flashed through her heart, and her whole life seemed to depend on his answer.

"I'll tell you in the boat—nowhere else," he said tantalizingly.

"But I want to know—so very—very much," lifting up her eager face with parted lips and flushed cheeks.

"I'll tell you anything and everything—in the boat," with a sudden longing tugging at his world-worn heart.

"Very well," with decision. No matter if she spoilt her pretty dress, angered her aunt, and lost half the ball—the truth she must know, or die. "I will come."

There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes which made her shudder, but a partner came up at the moment, and carried her off. He followed her with a curious glance, muttering to himself,—

"If I had only met her sooner!"

CHAPTER V.

A CRY FOR HELP.

It is very pleasant to have plenty of partners, to know that you are admired and sought after by some of the best men in the room; but it becomes positively aggravating when the only man you care for never takes the trouble to come near you, and looks as if he were enjoying himself quite well without you.

Poor little Ellice had a hard part to play, but she inherited her father's bravery, and she bore up with a cheerful smile till the end. Charlie Spencer hurried away to fetch her fan, which she had left on a sofa, and so for a minute she was at last alone.

Sir Thomas and General Dering were standing in the window behind her, but she was hidden from them by the folds of a heavy curtain, and so they talked at their ease.

"Terrible thing for Woodbridge," remarked the General. "An only son, and a hopeless drunkard."

"Last night he was out of the room the whole evening, not fit to be seen; but I believe they got him round somehow, and he talked to some of the girls," Sir Thomas rejoined, sadly.

"His mother must be on thorns whenever he is at home. They tell me," lowering his voice, "that he goes quite mad when the fit is on him."

"Tried to kill his cousin once, and yet they are the best of friends."

Ellice listened breathlessly. Could it be true? No, a thousand times "no"; and yet they were very old friends, who ought to have known the truth. Was he mad when he stood on the terrace with Emily Lennard?

She looked across to where Bruin was leaning against the doorway talking to Lady Woodbridge. The Viscountess looked much pleased at having him there, and not at all on thorns; and Bruin himself, with his fair frank face, and his well-made figure looked the ideal of an English gentleman. Oh! those two old men must be raving mad themselves. That he was neither a madman nor a drunkard she could stake her own small head, even if all the judges in England swore it.

His eyes met hers, but he instantly looked away, and an expression of proud reserve crept over his handsome face, as he thought of his despised flowers left to wither upstairs, as he remembered that she had loved him only for the sake of an imaginary future title.

"Here you are. I've only just found it," Charlie Spencer said, as he came up with her fan. "Shan't we take a turn in the garden?"

"No, Miss Fitzeden is coming with me," interposed Arthur Standish, without any ceremony.

"I should think that was for Miss Fitzeden to decide," rejoined Charlie, with a doubtful glance at Standish.

"I've decided," he said, roughly. "Come along, Ellice, we won't have any dashed interference, will we?"

She drew back disgusted by his strong language, as well as by his rough manner; but losing all control over himself, he caught hold of her hand, drew it through his arm, and almost dragged her forcibly down the few stone steps on to the terrace.

"You promised to come in the boat," he said, with a thickness in his voice that was not natural to it.

"Miss Fitzeden, pray let me persuade you not to go," Charlie Spencer said, eagerly, as he hurried after her. "You will catch your death of cold."

"I promised," she said, with a quiver on her lips.

"Then I will fetch you a shawl, or something. Wait for me."

He ran into the house, and picking up the first wrap he could find, ran out again, along the terrace and down the path which led straight to the boat-house.

But when he reached the small ornamental building all was silence, except for the lap of the water against its wooden walls. He listened, but could hear no sound of human voices, so he naturally concluded that they had given up the insane project, and had probably gone for a turn in the shrubbery instead.

He returned slowly towards the Castle, holding the cloak carelessly over his arm. Presently he met one or two men, who chaffed him about looking for a lost love. He answered them readily enough, but all his high spirits had gone from him, and he could not divest himself of a strange uneasiness. He leant against the frame of one of the large French windows listening to the music, and watching the dancers, but no longer feeling inclined to join them.

Presently Bruin came up to him, and asked him what he was doing with that cloak—was he looking for an eligible partner to put inside it?

"No, I got it for somebody else's partner," he said disconsolately; "but she has disappeared."

"It is quite warm; why should anyone want it?"

"Why, you see, I don't think Miss Fitzeden looks over strong, and she was going on the river," Charlie said in a low voice.

"On the river!" in utter amazement. "Who was mad enough to propose it?"

"Your cousin Standish."

"Great Scott—I thought he was safe in the library. We must go after them at once. At least I will—give me that cloak, if you don't mind."

"Perhaps she won't like it," doubtfully.

"I don't care whether she does or not," impatiently. "Which way did they go?"

"Don't know. I've been to the boat-house. All the boats were there."

"There's another down by the willows—it's half worn out, but Arthur mayn't know that!"

He ran on as he talked, descended the steps with the speed of a goat; and cut across the sloping lawn in a slanting direction. In a few minutes they both stood under the willows, and to their great relief found the old boat at its moorings.

"Thank Heaven for that," said Bruin fervently.

Charlie looked up at him as he stood still, racking his brains as to what he had better do next. His anxiety was great, for he knew that his cousin was in no fit state to be roaming about unwatched, least of all with a young girl; and yet, having kept the Woodvilles' sad secret loyally for many years, he did not wish to let it out to Spencer, unless under the most pressing necessity.

"We may as well go back," Charlie began.

"No, I shan't be quite easy till I find them. You see Miss Fitzeden is under my aunt's charge, so I feel bound to look after her. You keep down on the lower path, and I will go up the shrubbery."

"What shall I say if I come upon them?"

"Say that Lady Woodville wants to speak to Miss Fitzeden at once."

"All right, she will think me horribly interfering," and he walked off, with a shrug of his shoulders, not liking the commission at all.

As soon as he was out of sight, Bruin plunged into the darkness of the shrubbery, keeping both eyes and ears on the alert. The music from the Castle came to him with a muffled sound, so that he could only now and then distinguish the tune they were playing. He seemed far away from all joy and festivity, and a great foreboding hung over his spirits. Arthur Standish was a dipsomaniac of the most dangerous type. His malady only came on at intervals; but when he was suffering from one of his attacks he was like a madman.

The evening before he had arrived in such an odd state that Bruin was obliged to keep watch over him in the library till he was relieved by Lord Woodville. They dosed him with strong tea, in which they had put a large amount of soda, and he recovered himself almost completely before he went to bed.

He had promised his mother, on his word of honour, that he would drink nothing more exciting than claret and soda-water the next day; and he had kept his word till the sight or the smell of the champagne was too much for him.

Bruin had found him out, and induced him to play a game of billiards with his father. Lord Woodville played on with the patience of a nineteenth-century Job, bearing with his son's outbursts of temper, strong language and extraordinary play, suffering one real martyrdom to save himself from a worse which would have been his son's exposure of himself before his guests. But when Standish threw down his cue, and said he was going for a quiet stroll in the garden, he had not sufficient influence to stop him, and went helplessly after his nephew on whom he had grown accustomed to depend.

Unfortunately he missed him, and just as Bruin disappeared down the garden, he took to walking up and down the terrace like a sentinel, prepared to stop his son, at all hazards, from entering the dancing-room; whilst Lady Woodville, worn out with anxiety, took her station by the large doors which opened into the hall.

It might have been such a happy evening if it had not been for the unexpected arrival of Standish the night before, but all the pleasure had been spoilt by the constant wearing anxiety of being always on the watch.

Bruin forgot all his anger against Ellice, as his anxiety increased with every minute. He no longer remembered, as he had been deluded into thinking, that she had changed towards him directly she heard that he was not Lord Woodville's son; he only thought of her as young and fragile, and longing for help; her large dark eyes which had been so inexpressibly wistful that day—wild with terror.

There was a quick step, and his pulses gave a bound as he saw a girl coming hastily towards him in a white dress, but they slackened as he discovered, to his disappointment, as the light of a stray lantern fell on her face, that it was Emily Lennard.

"Where's Arthur?" she asked, in a sort of

imperative tone, as she stopped straight in front of him.

"I wish you could tell me," he said quietly.

"I believe you have shut him up somewhere, and it's a shame—it's a shame," she repeated, passionately. "You want to make him out mad, I know, just because you are dying to step into his shoes."

"In order that I might have the honour of marrying Miss Lennard?" he asked, with a sarcastic smile, for he was tired to death of her continual accusations.

She stamped her foot in impotent rage.

"I wouldn't have you, if you were a duke," she cried, scornfully. "You needn't think I would; but Arthur—I must find him; he was going to dance with me, and he dances better than anyone else."

"Still I would advise you to go back and get another partner," with cold courtesy.

"I don't want another," hotly. "You're all against him: mother, father, cousin—the whole crew. He hasn't a friend but me."

"You are mistaken; but I can't stop to argue."

"You don't seem very busy," she said, looking at him, curiously.

Just then a piercing scream rang through the surrounding silence.

Bruin started, and looked wildly round, wondering where the sound came from. He could see nothing for the blinding, bewildering canopy of leaves.

"What is it?" cried Emily, looking up at him with a scared face, and trembling from head to foot.

He did not answer her, but bent his head on one side to catch the first sound, afraid to move, lest he might go in the wrong direction. It came again—an unmistakable cry for help, wrung by direst agony or necessity from a girl's blanched lips. Like a dog loosed from the chain at which he had been tugging for hours, Bruin dashed through the trees, and Emily, urged on by wildest terror, followed.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"Now, keep your promise," Ellice said, for the twentieth time.

Standish had given up the boat because Charlie Spencer had found out that they were going in it, and he was afraid of being followed; but he had led her a very uncomfortable walk through the bushes, never answering her questions, or even uttering a word till he had brought her up an ivied knoll, on the top of which was a summer-house shaped like a pagoda.

He led her up a tiny stair to a room on the second storey, which was prettily furnished in a Japanese style, and lighted by a lamp which hung from an ornamental hook in the ceiling.

He placed her on the sofa, went back to the door and locked it, put the key in his pocket, and then threw himself down beside her.

"At last, darling," he said, hoarsely.

Her thoughts fixed on the one object that had brought her there, Ellice said, firmly,—

"Tell me who was on the terrace last night, or I won't speak another word to you."

He took hold of her hand, but she snatched it away.

"You little vixen," he said, indistinctly, for the champagne had affected his speech as well as his brain. "Are you jealous of old Em? She's awfully fond of me—always was; but I like you far the best."

"Then it was you—you—not Bruin?" her chest panting, a new light coming into her eyes.

"Catch Bruin stirring one step to speak to Em or any other woman," he said, jeeringly. "Good fellow, but awful bore. Never does anything a bit risky."

"Oh, what have I done?" clasping her hands, and looking round anywhere but in his face, which was bent towards hers with a very odd look in his dark eyes. "Why didn't I know that it couldn't be he?"

"Don't know—same name—often mistaken. Girls make love to him sometimes, taking him for the future Viscount—awful joke."

"What do you mean?" staring at him full in the face for once. "He is Lord Woodbridge's son, so he must be——"

"Beg pardon, but I'm his son instead. The other one's father is under the ground."

"Is this true?" her eyes opened wide.

"Ask my mother—ask Bruin himself—ask Em——"

"Then you are—the madman—the drunkard, that those old men were talking of," flashed through her mind, though she kept those dreadful epithets to herself, as she started to her feet in a paroxysm of terror.

"Take me back. I must go back at once."

"Not you, little coz!" sitting still, and looking at her with admiration in his otherwise rather vacant eyes; "let us be cosy up here away from everybody. I want to tell you how delicious I think you."

"No, not for the world!" She ran to the door and rattled the handle vehemently, when she found to her horror that it was locked. "Let me out, this moment," she said, as composedly and as imperatively as she could, turning to face him with flashing eyes but desperately white cheeks.

"Not I, my little beauty. We'll live together, you and I, you shall be my wife. I swear it solemnly," and getting up slowly from the sofa, he stood straight in front of her.

"Never—never!" her small form drawn to its full height, her eyes dilating.

"I must have a smoke whilst we talk it over," fumbling in his pocket. "You don't mind?"

"I don't mind anything if you'll let me out," tapping the floor impatiently with her small high-heeled shoe.

"I'll let you out, certainly. I'll let you out," trying to light a match, which was a difficult task because of the unsteadiness of his hand, "we can't get married unless we get out."

"Where's the key—the key?" she asked, growing more and more frightened by his evident want of sense. "Oh, why did I ever come?"

"To get away from everyone," with a cunning leer in his eyes. "Say you love me better than old Bruin," putting one hand on her shoulder, and dropping his cigar as he bent down towards her.

She shrank from him with sudden, invincible loathing, and as he came nearer till she felt his warm breath on her cheeks, she pushed him away with all the strength lent her by excitement. He staggered back, knocking his head against the frail lamp, which overturned and spilt some of the lighted oil on the floor.

He might have stamped it out at once; but in a minute it had run across the polished floor, setting light first to some most combustible matting, and afterwards to the edge of a flimsy curtain. The curtain was in a blaze from top to bottom, and as Ellice saw the flame behind Arthur's head, a wild scream escaped her lips.

He threw his arms round her in an instant, really with a brave man's natural instinct to protect the weaker sex, but it only frightened her all the more.

She tore herself away from him with a loud cry, and rushed to the window. It was so far from the ground that she dared not jump, and turned back with a hunted look in her eyes to the drunken man who was staring stupidly at the rising flames, but making no effort to extinguish them.

"Give me the key," she said hoarsely. "Are you mad? Give me the key."

"No; you want to get back to Bruin," doggedly, as he put out his hand to guard his pocket.

"But we shall die," she sobbed.

"Yes, we'll die together," solemnly, "you and I."

"No—no—no; oh! help, help—help!" she cried with all the power of her lungs, her youth rising up in wild antagonism to the thought of death, as she ran back once more to the window.

"Jump down, and I'll catch you," a voice came from down below.

Oh, joy! there was help at last. Heaven had been merciful. She was not to die just yet! Even then she thought of the poor wretch who had brought her to this terrible pass. She looked back over her shoulder, as she tried with trembling legs to climb up on to the sill. "Come, Arthur, come!"

But he stood still in the middle of the room, with flames over his dark head, and flames behind his back.

"Be quick, for Heaven's sake," shouted Bruin.

She hesitated for a moment, and then calling all her courage together, sprang into the dark space before her. The next moment she was caught in Bruin's eager arms. He held her in a tight clasp for one instant, then placed her gently on the ground.

"Where's Arthur? You've left him to die," cried Emily Lennard, wringing her hands, whilst Charlie Spencer, who had just run up, knelt down by Ellice's side.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

Before she could answer, Bruin had dashed up the stairs in search of his cousin. Finding the door locked, he kicked it open with one vigorous kick. A cloud of smoke came all over him, and nearly choked him; but as it cleared away he found himself face to face with his cousin.

"Come out, for Heaven's sake," he said quickly, stretching out his hand to pull him out.

But Arthur Standish showed by no sign that he was conscious of his danger, though a bit of loose drapery from the ceiling, which was lighted at the end, was hanging over his head, and would soon singe his dark hair, and the dense smoke was enveloping him in its folds.

There was something most weird in his apathy, for it proved so convincingly that his ordinary amount of intelligence had gone from him, or was in a state of torpor. But at the sight of Bruin's face looking at him through the smoke, a strange change came to his own. The jealousy which had been smouldering in his disordered brain all through the latter part of the evening, leapt into most active life. He forgot the old brotherly love which had knit these two so touchingly together for so many years. He only saw the man who was disputing with him the possession of that pretty little girl who had just run away.

As Bruin seized him by the arm to drag him out into safety, he shook him off roughly in an access of insane rage; and then clutching him by the collar, held him fast in a death-like grip, whilst he whipped a knife out of his pocket which he had taken from the supper-table for some reason which was never known. The blade shone red as blood in the light of the burning room, till it was buried out of sight in his rescuer's chest.

Bruin tottered backwards, and then fell with a heavy thud down the stairs.

Charlie Spencer sprang forward with a cry of horror. Emily gave a scream which sounded far and wide, and reached Lord Woodville's ears on the terrace.

Ellice started to her feet, Arthur Standish gave a wild leap over the prostrate body of his cousin, which nearly filled the narrow stairs, pushed Spencer's slight form roughly on one side, and then stood still, looking as if half-dazed.

Emily rushed up to him, and put her slender hand upon his arm.

"Arthur, what have you done?" she asked, in wild reproach.

"Done?" in a low voice. "Give you my

word, I don't know. Bruin's a fool. Why doesn't he get up?"

Charlie Spencer had succeeded, with Ellice's help in dragging Bruin's senseless body down on to the grass out of the reach of the flames. She had pillowed his heavy head upon her knee, and was leaning over his cold white face with dry eyes, for tears were frozen by horror, and deepest despair in her heart.

Arthur gave one glance at the group, then shuddered from head to foot.

"Tell him to get up," he said, hoarsely.

"He can't," Emily answered, with a sob in her throat. "You have killed him."

Lord Woodville, Sir Thomas Esmond, Harding, the Viscount's confidential valet, and several others ran up breathlessly.

"What is it? What has happened?" Lord Woodville asked, pantingly, as his eye ran quickly over the burning summer-house, the group at the foot of the stairs, and finally rested on his son's face.

Emily was sobbing with long, half-choked, gasping sobs, which was the only sound that could be heard besides the crackling of the flames.

"She says I've killed him; but, Dad, you don't believe it?" coming up to his father, and laying his hand on his shoulder. "It's Bruin; you know, we were always the best of chums. I—I wouldn't hurt him for the world."

There was something fearfully pitiful in the poor fellow's struggle not to believe that he had done that awful deed; but his father could only feel the horror of the murder, and the downfall of all his pride and hope, as he shrank away from him with a shudder.

"You unhappy boy!" he exclaimed, out of the excessive bitterness of his heart. "I knew you were a drunkard; but I never thought you would be a murderer. Don't come near me," waving him off with his thin aristocratic hand.

Arthur gave a look round, saw Emily's bent head, Ellice's white despairing face, the look of horror and aversion on all the others.

A convulsive shudder shook him from head to foot as a wave of fuller consciousness passed over his brain.

No one could guess the horror of that awakening—no one could gauge the depth of the shame, the crushing humiliation, the torturing remorse.

He clasped his hands and pressed them against his forehead, feeling as if his head would burst from the crowding pressure of his thoughts.

His father had turned from him, and had joined the group round Bruin. It was perfectly useless to try and save the summer-house, so they had decided to leave it to burn itself out, whilst they concentrated their energies on trying to save the wounded man.

They wisely left the knife in his chest, knowing that he would be almost certain to bleed to death if it were pulled out by inexperienced hands.

Harding had taken down two shutters which were fortunately still untouched by the flames. These they bound firmly together, and some of them were pulling off their coats in order to lay them on the hardness of the wood.

CHAPTER VII.

"WHERE'S BRUIN?"

No one was thinking of the miserable man who had been the primary cause of the disaster. He stood there feeling utterly alone, isolated by his guilt from all who were more innocent than himself. He felt as if there were no forgiveness for him, either in earth or heaven.

"Oh, Heaven! why was I born?" the cry broke involuntarily from him, and as it rang through the silence, it touched a softer chord in his father's heart.

After all, he thought, the poor fellow can't have known what he was doing. It is worse for him, I suppose, than for all of us.

He turned round with the intention of taking his son home, and into the Castle by a back entrance. When he had got him there he would speak to him as he had never dared to speak before, and surely, if he pointed to his dying nephew, he could induce him to swear that he would never let anything stronger than water touch his lips again; and then, perhaps, after all, a happier, more peaceful future might be waiting for them, and remorse might effect what his mother's and his father's love had been powerless to achieve before.

All this flashed quickly through his mind; but when he turned, his unhappy son had disappeared.

He suffered a few pangs of anxiety, but did not make himself very uneasy, quieting himself with the thought that he was reasonable now, and, therefore, would be sure to go straight home, and probably shut himself up in his own rooms.

Arthur walked quickly through the shrubbery as if he were in a great hurry, driven on by the terrible thoughts in his brain, which was as bad as being urged forward by goads of red-hot iron.

Behind lay the horror of his murdered cousin; before him, what? He neither knew nor cared, but hurried on with stern set face and fixed eyes.

Presently he came upon a woman, who was advancing timidly through the darkness, holding up her long skirts of silk and lace. A little ray of light came through the branches, and was caught by the splendid diamonds in her hair.

Arthur would have passed her hastily, but he saw it was Lady Woodbridge, and hesitated.

"Arthur, is that you?" she asked, nervously.

She had been told of the red light in the sky by her maid, who had caught sight of it from one of the upper windows; and on not being able to find either her husband, his valet, her nephew, or even Sir Thomas Esmond, could not control her anxiety, so slipped away from her guests just as the cotillion had begun, and started with unwonted independence to search out the cause for herself.

She was not at all accustomed to walking about the shrubbery alone in the middle of the night, and she kept fancying that crooked stems were burglars stooping in the shadow, or that dry roots were live animals ready to jump out and spring upon her.

She was, therefore, immensely relieved to meet her son, and she forgot all her fears on his account as she laid her hand upon his coat-sleeve.

"What is it? Is anything on fire?" she asked, anxiously.

"The summer-house."

"Oh, that does not matter much," in a tone of relief. "I don't suppose anyone was in it?"

"Yes, I was—and Ellice."

"Oh, poor child. She isn't hurt?" frightened by his manner.

"No."

"You are sure? You are keeping something back?" tremblingly.

"On my honour. She's all right; at least, I think so." He could not remember now how it was that she escaped, but he knew that he had seen her afterwards, sitting on the ground with Bruin's head in her lap.

"Where's Bruin?" It was so natural to depend on him that she asked for him before her husband.

At the sound of his name, Arthur shook from head to foot.

"Mother," he said hoarsely, "you know, don't you, that I always cared for him, more than for anyone else, except you, of course?"

"Yes, dear boy, of course you did; and he has always been so good to you." She could not see his face, because of the deep shadow, but there was a tone in his voice which brought back all her fears. "What is it? Have you quarrelled?"

"I—I—don't think so. You'll know soon enough. One kiss, mother. Good-bye. You've been an angel to me—always—always." He stooped down and kissed her frightened face, into which he had brought all the wrinkles which damaged her once far-famed beauty; and then, before she could stop him, he was gone!

He walked on fast till he reached the end of the shrubbery, and came in sight of the illuminated terraces and the brilliantly lighted windows of the reception-rooms. Some people were strolling up and down in front of these windows, others were dancing cheerily to the notes of "Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay."

This seemed part of quite another life to the one he had left behind him in the darkness out there in that quiet corner. He scarcely knew which was the real one, this or the other, but walked on as if in a dream. A man named Thornton came up to him, and asked him where his cousin was. He stood still as if pondering what answer to make.

"He is not here," he said, slowly.

"We've wanted him ever so much. Couldn't get the cotillion to go at all. But, perhaps, you will do instead."

"Another time," Arthur said, and hurried on.

Thornton looked after him in surprise.

"Queer fellow! Screw loose, I fancy," and then he pulled out a cigar, and sat down on a seat to enjoy it.

It was strange, but it never seemed to occur to Arthur Standish to avoid the crowd, and slip into the Castle by a private way. He had one fixed idea in his head, and he was entirely engrossed in the effort to carry it out. People had been dancing in a sort of disjointed way, in obedience to the tunes played by the indefatigable band; but they were becoming uneasy at the absence of all the Woodville party, and as soon as Arthur's tall form appeared in the window, several hurried up to him.

One by one they dropped back, for the sight of his face over-awed them. It had been blackened by the smoke, and he seemed as if he saw none of them, but stalked on through the crowded room with his head in the air, and his eyes, sombre, dark and despairing looking straight before him. As he passed, a chill silence fell upon every chattering tongue.

Not a word was said, but every eye followed him. It was as if a ghost had walked through the ball-room and left a curse behind him.

By general consent the dancing ceased, and people gathered in knots, raising their eyebrows, and exchanging questioning looks with one another, whilst the band played on with no one to listen to it.

Arthur crossed the marble hall, and gained the foot of the stairs. There were several couples sitting out on sofas for the purposes of quiet flirtation; but the laughing compliment died away on the lips that were going to utter it, the tender glance was exchanged for an astonished stare, as the son of the house passed by.

Rose Verstrum, a little girl in a smart pink frock, who was staying in the house, ran up to him with the confidence of childhood.

"Ask mammy to let me stay up, and I'll give 'oo a kiss."

She raised her baby face—so pure in its utter innocence—with a kiss waiting for him on her rosebud mouth, as she clung to his knees.

"No, no, don't touch me," he said, hoarsely, as he quickly, but gently, detached her clinging hands.

She had never been so rebuffed before, and she stood still looking after him with pouting lips and disappointed eyes.

"Naughty Mitter 'Tandish, I don't love 'oo a bit!"

A deep sigh was the only answer which came floating down the stairs, as a nurse, who had been lying in ambush, darted forward, and carried her precious charge off to bed.

At last Arthur Standish reached his own

rooms. Drawing a deep breath of relief he locked the door, and began his operations at once in feverish haste.

Gradually the decision had shaped itself in his mind that he must go away—not, as usual, to come back whenever the fancy prompted him—but for ever.

He had sinned so deeply, he had disgraced himself so utterly, that his parents must hate the sight of him; and it was due to them and to their injured feelings never to let their eyes rest upon him again.

From first to last he had been a failure; expelled from Eton because he came into school in an intoxicated state, and ploughed for the army because he had faddled his brain hopelessly during the examination.

He had been much in love with a lovely girl, named Edith Stapleton. She had accepted him, and Lord and Lady Woodbridge had rejoiced over the engagement; but after a few weeks it was broken off, and all for the same reason.

He dragged a portmanteau out of the depths of an old-fashioned cupboard. He had never packed it for himself before; but he knew that if he sent for his own man, Martin, the news of his departure would be spread over the Castle long before he started, so he set to work with all the energy that was left to him.

He threw in clean shirts, a pair of trousers, and a coat. Each time he went backwards and forwards to the chest of drawers or wardrobe it seemed a longer distance. A strange dizziness came over him. Sometimes it seemed as if the trunk rose up from the floor to meet him just as he was stooping to put something into it, at others the room seemed to be turning round as if moving like a wheel on an axle.

He had never felt exactly like this before, and could not conceive what was going to happen to him. His head was on fire, and odd fancies kept troubling him.

Was it Bruin looking in at the window with that broad smile on his face? But how could he get there without wings; and why was he laughing so ridiculously? Arthur turned his back, and the next moment it seemed as if a black shadow like a gigantic bat was hanging over his head.

It was coming lower and lower, and with it came a ghastly stifling sense of oppression. He bent his head, his body, his knees, till at last he reached the floor with this horror still pursuing him. Then he tried to put up his hands to shield his head, but all power had gone out of his muscles. Then helpless, hopeless, he sank on the floor with a groan of utter surrender, and the darkness seemed to close over his head.

A long while after there was the rustle of a woman's dress in the corridor, and presently there was a gentle tap at the door. No answer. The tap was repeated again and again, each time louder than the last. Then the handle of the door rattled, after which a woman's voice whispered.

"Arthur, come to me. I want to say one word!" No response. "Arthur, Arthur! don't be so unkind. It's Em—Em, just let me see you for a moment!"

The silence was like the silence of death. Was he lying like a log on the floor, with a white face turned upwards with sightless eyes? The thought grew upon her, till it became a conviction. She could not bear it any longer alone out there by herself. She had loved this man with a stupendous amount of devotion, considering the object of it—a devotion that could not credit Arthur with any evil. Those who loved him, and yet could not deny that he had many faults—oh! how she had scorned and reviled them!

She fled down the corridor like a frightened stag, and met Lord Woodville in the gallery.

"What is it?" he asked, wearily, as she stood with panting chest before him. Surely enough had happened, and yet her agitation seemed to announce a fresh calamity, and he dreaded to hear it.

"Arthur!" she said, and stopped with wild eyes fixed upon his tired face.

"What—something more?" he asked, almost angrily.

"Oh, don't—don't!" as if she guessed the anger in his mind. "I believe he's dead," and she sank in a heap at his feet.

CHAPTER VIII.

ELLICE DOES NOT SAY "NO."

Whilst the guests lingered about downstairs, uncertain what to do, perfectly ignorant of the tragedy which had occurred, and only waiting to take leave of their host and hostess, Sir Thomas Esmond appeared in the doorway of the long ball-room, and said that Lord and Lady Woodbridge begged to be excused; but in consequence of the serious accident which had befallen their nephew, they had deputed him to wish them good-night, or rather good-morning.

Public curiosity broke loose in a fire of questions, and the old Baronet was besieged on every side, but he only let out just as much as he chose to tell.

He told them that the summer-house had caught fire whilst Arthur Standish was in it, and that his cousin had been severely injured when trying to save him.

"But we saw Mr. Standish, and he didn't tell us one word about it," objected one lady.

"No wonder. After all he has gone through, the poor fellow scarcely knew what he was doing. I expect he will have an attack of brain fever."

"But, Sir Thomas"—a pretty girl, with an eager face, edged her way to the front—"how is Mr. Wentworth Standish—the one you call Bruin? Is he really bad?"

The Baronet's eyes grew dim.

"We hope he may get over it," and he turned away quickly.

Everyone was afraid to ask another question, and they hurried to their carriages as fast as they could to escape from the stricken house.

* * * *

Lord Woodville went back to Bruin's bedroom, and beckoned Harding to come with him. Long ago he had taken care to have a skeleton-key of his son's room, so that he had no difficulty in opening the door; but he was afraid of going in alone. As he stepped into the room, his mind was relieved at once by the signs of packing.

(*Continued on page 525.*)

HILDRED ELSINORE.

CHAPTER XIX.

Mrs. Claude Maitland found the time hang very heavily on her hands after her husband's departure. Certainly she had her mother to keep her company, but, dearly as they loved each other, the two had very little in common.

It does sometimes happen that the most commonplace matter-of-fact women have children with romantic dreamy temperaments, and feel towards them not unlike the hen is supposed to feel towards the ducks she has brought up. Love, duty and respect may freely be given by these children to their mothers, but there is not the perfect sympathy, the intense mutual confidence one always hopes to find between parent and child.

Every day brought Nan a letter from her husband. Claude was a devoted correspondent, and never missed sending a few lines to his young wife. The post always came while the ladies were sitting over their late breakfast, and those letters brought such a joyous flush to poor Nan's face, that at those times her mother was perfectly contented about her, and felt that since she evidently loved Maitland as intensely as ever, she had indeed done well to consent to the marriage.

Mrs. Robson was never privileged to hear much of those letters. Nan would perhaps reveal that Claude was well, and his uncle more than usually trying; or that old Mr. Maitland found the weather so cold he could not go out; but beyond such scraps as these, Nan kept the letters to herself, and read and re-read them until her mother grew anxious, and wondered in her heart whether such overpowering idolatrous love could ever settle down into the tranquil affection of married life.

Poor Mrs. Robson hated St. Madeleine, or, to be more correct, she hated being there. It was, she admitted, a very pretty place; but she yearned for the sound of an English voice, the sight of a few suburban shops. Poor thing, not being in love, the existence her daughter thought so peaceful proved dreadfully monotonous to her. Time hung as heavily on her hands as it did on Nan's, and she could not help thinking that if Mr. Maitland knew he was likely to be detained for some time, she and Nan would be far happier in a livelier place.

Besides, all her life the good widow had been an industrious woman. Of late years she had lived in comfort, yet every moment had been busy with housekeeping, dressmaking, and looking after the comfort of her lodgers. Mrs. Robson had never found too much leisure. If only she could have found something to do in the little French village, she might not have felt so dreary, and grown so dull and low-spirited.

"Really, Nan!" she ventured to say, when she had been at St. Madeleine a fortnight, and still she heard no mention of Mr. Maitland's return, "if your husband is going to be away much longer, don't you think we might move?"

The young wife opened her eyes in bewilderment at the suggestion.

"Whatever for, mamma? I am sure this is a lovely place!"

"Yes, my dear, but it is very dull. I think a little amusement and society would be nice for you now you are so much stronger."

"I should hate to go into society without Claude. I am perfectly content to stay here till he can come and fetch me!"

Mrs. Robson sighed. She thought of her comfortable little house in Fulham, of the mince-meat and plum puddings she would now have been preparing, and, above all, of the kindly friends within reach. She felt all she had left behind but badly replaced by the beautiful scenery of St. Madeleine, and she ventured a further hint.

"You see, my dear, your husband is not quite free to please himself; he depends on his uncle for money, and so has to study his fancies. It may be some time before the old gentleman releases him, and St. Madeleine is a very out-of-the-way place. I really think you would be happier somewhere nearer where Claude could come to you, even if only for a day, whenever his uncle could spare him!"

Nan shook her head.

"Claude wanted me to stay here," she persisted, "and I have a great deal to do."

"My dear child, you do nothing from morning to night except read. It isn't good for you, Nan. It's as bad as bad can be."

Nan blushed.

"I am studying hard," she whispered. "I want to make myself more worthy of Claude. You see, mamma, he is a gentleman, and when we go home to England I shall have to entertain his friends, and I don't want them to think he has married a little ignoramus, and make him feel ashamed of me."

This speech put Mrs. Robson out, or, as she would have said, "rubbed her all the wrong way."

"I never heard that Mr. Maitland had any friends," she said, sharply, "except this cranky old uncle; he never speaks of any. And

as to being ashamed of you, he'd better not hint at such a thing to me. You're as well educated as any girl need be, considering I paid the High School's fees till you were turned seventeen. And as to being an ignoramus, you've earned a pretty little sum already with your pen. I don't like to hear you run yourself down, child. Mr. Maitland may be a very pleasant gentleman; but you're quite good enough for anyone—so there!"

Nan smiled a little wistfully.

"At any rate, he thinks so," she said, gravely; "and, mother dear, don't be vexed at his keeping us waiting for him here. It is not his fault. He said only in his last letter how much he wished to be with us."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Robson, a little mollified, "so that you understand each other I suppose it's all right; but I know I shouldn't have liked my husband to rush off before I'd been married a month, for all the uncles in Christendom. I suppose he'll come for Christmas?"

"I—I hope so."

But she did not speak confidently, and Mrs. Robson determined very wisely not to expect her truant son-in-law until she saw him.

It wanted only ten days now to the great festival, and the widow reflected that if she was forced to spend it in foreign parts she yet need not be deprived of seasonable fare.

Why not make a plum-pudding herself, since the French cook confessed, through the housemaid, who, with her scanty English acted as interpreter, that though she had heard of such delicacies, she had never seen one in her life?

There were one or two shops in St. Madeleine, if you could call them so, when their stock-in-trade consisted chiefly of such few things as could be packed in the front window of a peasant's cottage.

Mrs. Robson decided to go down to the village herself, and try if she could procure the requisite ingredients.

It was a bold undertaking, since she spoke not a word of French, and it was not to be expected the country folk would understand English; but she had armed herself with the picture of a plum pudding cut from an advertisement of Eno's fruit salt, and she felt quite hopeful about her expedition, her only regret being that Nan had refused to join her, saying she must stay at home and write to her husband.

But a surprise was in store for Mrs. Robson. In the very small space in front of M. Panot's counter already stood two customers whom one glance convinced her were strangers.

She had grown familiar with the appearance of the few "upper class" French at St. Madeleine. She knew that she and Nan had been the only foreigners; but that the two men before her were "gentry" she would have staked her oath, and she felt pretty sure the elder, despite the fluent French in which he spoke to the shopkeeper, was English.

A moment more, and her suspicion became a certainty, for he turned to his companion and said, cheerfully,—

"We'd better be off now, Jim. There's not much room in this little place, and there's a lady waiting."

Although the most circumspect of matrons, Mrs. Robson could have hugged the old gentleman on the spot. It was the first time she had heard her own tongue outside the *maisonette* since she left Paris.

She could have danced for joy. What she did do was more useful; though, certainly, slightly unconventional. Picture in hand she accosted the gentleman and told him of her difficulty.

She had never spent a Christmas-day away from England before, and she wanted to make a plum-pudding. Would he, could he ——"

Here she broke off from sheer embarrassment.

The old man was equal to the occasion. With a courtly bow he told her he was quite at her service. Did she wish him to order the ingredients of M. Panrot; or, if she preferred it, he should be happy for his English servant, who was a clever cook, to concoct a pudding for her.

Overpowered by such kindness, Mrs. Robson produced her modest list of ingredients required and quantities. All she wished was to "have it put into French."

The old gentleman promptly managed it; M. Panot declared he would send up the parcel, and Mrs. Robson found herself leaving the little shop in company with the two gentlemen.

Only when they were in the narrow street did she notice the elder was evidently an invalid. He walked with difficulty, and leant heavily on "Jim's" arm.

To see sickness and not proffer help was beyond Mrs. Robson's power. In a few moments she had begged to be of use, declared she was only at St. Madeleine for her daughter's health, and found the days terribly long without her accustomed duties.

The old gentleman smiled.

"I don't think, madam, my complaint needs much nursing; but if I find I knock up my good friend here and my servant, I shall certainly remember your kind offer. I have lived out of England for more than twenty years, but now I seem to find an English voice pleasanter in my ears than any foreign one."

The young man waited till he had seen his friend enter the tiny house where they were staying, and then, walking quickly, he easily overtook Mrs. Robson on her long walk up the hill to the *maisonette*.

"I wanted to ask you," he said, courteously, "did you mean what you said just now?"

"Sir!" the good widow looked bewildered.

"I mean, are you really not afraid of coming into contact with illness—it may be with death? My friend is wonderfully cheerful; but the doctors in Paris all told me the same thing—he has only come here to die."

Mrs. Robson's honest face lighted up with pity.

"I'm only a simple working woman, sir," she said, simply; "but I've had a lot to do with sick folks. It does my very heart good to see an English face, and if I can be of any use to your friend I hope you'll let me know."

"It was his fancy to come here to die. His only child passed the last weeks of her life in this pleasant spot. I do my best for him; but a man is not like a woman."

"If you send for me, sir," said Mrs. Robson, "be sure I'll come any hour of the day or night. "I'm only here because my daughter's husband had to go to England, and he didn't like her to be left here alone."

"You said she was ill, I think?"

"She's quite well now, sir; but six months ago we all thought she was dying. Mr. Claude, he married her as soon as she was out of danger, and brought her here. I've been with her more than a fortnight, and dreary work I've found it."

A regret in the tone made Jim Devenish look at the speaker more thoughtfully. Perhaps she felt he was puzzled, for she went on,—

"You see, sir, I brought up Nan to be a lady, and her husband's just a fine gentleman. They don't like me to go on letting lodgings and taking in dressmaking, and somehow, sir, I'm always feeling I'm not grand enough for them."

"Well, you are quite grand enough for us," said Jim, cheerfully, "and if you will come down some afternoon and read to Lord Netherton, or talk to him a bit, I'm sure he'll be grateful."

"Lord Netherton!" gasped the poor woman.

"My friend is Lord Netherton of Netherton Castle, and I am James Devenish of nowhere in particular. Now, if you will tell me your name we shall all be on comfortable terms."

"My name's Robson, sir; but I'm sure if I'd known the gentleman was that, I'd never have presumed to speak to him."

"Titles don't alter human nature, Mrs. Robson," said Jim, kindly. "Don't think of the Earl as a nobleman, but as a poor invalid whose last days on earth are very lonely."

This meeting made a great impression on Mrs. Robson. She tried to interest Nan in the sick gentleman, but the young wife was very self-engrossed in those days, and with a sigh, the mother had to confess her child cared nothing about her little confidences.

The doctor who came over from Beauville to see Lord Netherton, told Mrs. Robson St. Madeleine was one of the healthiest places on that coast. Finding he only lived twelve miles off and that a note at any time would summon him, the good woman grew more cheerful. It was something to know that a real English medical man was within two hours drive.

As to Jim Devenish and the Earl, the widow was simply invaluable to them. In times of trouble or sickness men turn instinctively to womanly help. Mrs. Robson never fussed, never fidgeted, she never came when they did not want her, but seemed to appear as though by magic when Lord Netherton was feeling "low." There was nothing vulgar or common about her. She might not be refined or accomplished, but she was a kind, motherly creature, and Jim Devenish often felt thankful they had fallen in with her.

"I do not think it can last much longer," he said to her very gravely, on Christmas Eve, when, the Earl being asleep, his friend was walking part of the way home with Mrs. Robson. "I shall never forget your goodness."

"It's very little I have done," said Mrs. Robson, quietly, "and, sir, it's been a relief to me to do that little, for things are going very crooked at home, and having the Earl to think of has kept me from fretting."

Jim noticed her voice was full of tears.

"Is there nothing I can do to help you?" he asked, kindly. "Is your daughter worse? Shall I ask Dr. Mills to look at her?"

"Nan's well enough, sir—it's only me the doubt tries."

"Look here," said Jim, pausing and pointing to one of the seats erected on the long path up the hill for tired pedestrians, "Sit down here and tell me what is the matter. I might be able to help."

"It may seem little enough to you, sir, but the doubt haunts me. I let my child marry a man of whom I know absolutely nothing, and I misdoubt me he's a scoundrel."

"Tell me all you can," said Jim, patiently.

Mrs. Robson asked nothing better. She started with the story of her lodger's mysterious disappearance in August, of Nan's illness, his abrupt return, and their sudden marriage. Throughout she spoke of her son-in-law as "Mr. Claude." Nan hated to hear her say, "Mr. Maitland," and "Claude" sounded to the humble widow too familiar. She had also noticed another thing, lately. He had evidently hired the maisonette in the name of "Claude," for bills were sent in so addressed, and he himself wrote to Nan as Madame Claude.

"Is Mr. Claude English?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"And now tell me, what is it you fear?"

"I don't know, sir. It all seems queer."

"Rich old uncles are given to be eccentric," remarked Devenish, cheerfully. "You don't suspect,' and he lowered his voice, 'any flaw in the marriage?"

"Oh no; it was at our own church, by license. And he loves Nan it's easy to see. He sends her heaps of money—more than she can spend; but——"

"Well?"

"I can't make it out about his uncle, sir. The telegrams and letters that old man has sent, one would think he didn't know his own mind for two minutes together. What I'm fearing is, that there's no uncle in the case, but Mr. Claude's one of a gang of gentlemen thieves, and that when there's business on hand they send for him, and keep him till it's

over. Nan begged of him to come for Christmas, but he says he can't."

Jim Devenish looked very thoughtful.

"You say he lived in your house for three months? Did you see none of his associates?"

"He never had a letter or a creature to call on him in all that time."

"Ah!"

"And he wouldn't know our friends. The doctor who brought Nan through her illness, and has been a friend to her for years, he asked to see her *fiancée*, but Claude refused."

"You call him Claude?" said Jim, quietly. "Do you mean that is his surname?"

"No, sir; but it's the name he likes Nan to go by here. When he lodged with me he used to be known by his full name, and he married my child in it."

"Will you tell me what it is? Don't, if you would rather not."

"Claude Maitland, sir—a good name enough, and he's handsome and pleasant spoken."

Mr. Devenish had turned deadly pale.

"Is he about the middle height, with dark, curly hair, strangely pale complexion, and good, clearly-marked features? The Claude Maitland I know dabbled in literature, and had been to Australia."

"That's him, sir," cried Mrs. Robson. "You couldn't mistake his complexion; but one thing you've not mentioned, and that's his eyes. They're lovely eyes—dark grey, with just a dash of blue. Sometimes, when he was my lodger, I've gone into his room meaning to give him notice, and he's just looked at me with those eyes, and I felt I couldn't do it."

"I am afraid it's the same," said Jim, gravely; "and if so, Heaven help your daughter, Mrs. Robson, for the Claude Maitland I met in Australia was an unmitigated scoundrel!"

CHAPTER XX.

Mr. Warrington's clerk was perfectly right on that December day when he told Captain Trefusis that the barrister and his wife were totally unprepared for the news of their niece's death.

The letter had come upon them as an awful shock; and neither Aunt Bessie nor her kind-hearted husband had much sympathy with Hildred's parents, for Mrs. Elsinore's letter seemed perfectly heartless.

Poor little Hildred! Had she been engaged to marry a man she loved, had she of her own free will promised her hand to one she trusted, she would have written at once to announce her engagement in Daffodil road; but Hildred could not tell Aunt Bessie she was to marry Guy Bertram. Instinct told her her aunt would read between the lines of her letter and condemn her sacrifice, and that self-sacrifice must be made. Her father should not be hastened into his grave, the children should not be robbed of future advantages, whatever she suffered!

One pang was spared her: Guy Bertram was not a demonstrative lover. He held her ice-cold hand in his after she had given her reluctant promise, but he never attempted to kiss her; and the very next day he came to the Rectory with his plans mapped out for sailing to Australia immediately after the wedding, and leaving his bride in her parents' care.

"It would not be fair to ask her to go to the other end of the world with me," he said, gravely, to Mrs. Elsinore; "I know you will take all possible care of her for me. I shall place a thousand pounds in the Chilton Bank for her expenses. I think that will last a year, but I hope to be home long before then."

On one point Hildred was firm, she would have no trousseau; not a yard of stuff, not a pair of gloves would she suffer her step-mother to buy for her.

"When once I am Mr. Bertram's wife," she said, simply, "I shall have to let him provide for me, but till then I will have nothing at his expense," and Mrs. Elsinore shrugged her shoulders, but had to give in.

"You are sure you are happy, dear?" her father asked her, anxiously, when the wedding-day drew near; "you are not doing this for us?" and the poor girl tried to smile and reassure him, though her very heart was breaking.

The more she saw of Guy Bertram the more she shrank from him, and the better she knew him the more certain she felt, in spite of her determination to marry him, he did not love her.

"Here," said Martha, coming into the bedroom where Hildred was lying down with a sick headache, "this letter came by the second post; I expect it's from Aunt Bessie, no one else ever writes to you."

"Put it down, please," said Hildred, languidly, "I'll read it when I'm better."

But when Martha had gone, and she rested herself to look at the envelope, she saw at once it was not her Aunt's writing, and she opened it with a kind of weary indifference. No one else—Martha had said—ever sent her letters; but it did not matter, nothing mattered, seeing in a week's time she was to be Guy Bertram's wife.

It was the letter Adam West had dictated at his office to Mrs. Smith. At first the words seemed to dance before Hildred's aching head, then she read it again and again, and at last it grew clear to her. Her strange distrust of Mr. Bertram was not uncalled for; she was right in thinking he wished to marry her from some other motive than love.

Hildred got up and bathed her face, she put eau de cologne on her throbbing brows, and then she felt able to think and look her position clearly in the face. Mr. Bertram gained all his money—he had told her so himself—from Lady Tempest's will; if her grandmother had died intestate, all would have been Hildred's.

At last, after anxious thought, the girl thought she had found the clue. Lady Tempest had left a later will than the one by which Mr. Bertram inherited, and he knew it.

"People often repent of their harshness when they are dying," thought the poor child, "perhaps it was so with my grandmother. Mr. Bertram is afraid to destroy the later will, but he thinks if he marries me it will be powerless to harm him."

Up and down she paced, thinking till thought was almost agony. Sure as she felt of Bertram's treachery, she dared not denounce him to her parents; her father would think her suspicions the basest ingratitude; her step-mother would call them "tomfoolery." After all, what had she to go on, save an anonymous letter? Her decision was taken; she would appeal for the help and council offered by the writer of that letter.

With trembling fingers she penned a few lines to "Hope," saying that her wedding-day was fixed for Christmas Eve, and she dared not provoke her step-mother's anger by refusing to keep her promise to Mr. Bertram unless she had proofs of his unworthiness.

She posted this letter with her own hands; and then she waited with anxious longing for the reply. She had to hear the wedding spoken of continually, had to endure a goodly share of her *fiancé's* company; and, what was almost worse, to receive the congratulations of all the village on her prospects.

"But you don't look happy, my dear," said farmer Gibson, gravely. "I thought somehow to have seen you brighter."

"I shall never be happy again," the girl said, with a choked sob. "Oh, Mr. Gibson, think of me as kindly as you can, for I am very miserable."

"And it's my belief, wife," the farmer declared, when describing this scene to his better half, "it's my belief the poor lass has just been driven into this business, for her heart's not in it."

"Hope" did not fail poor Hildred, the second letter was very short, but it gave the girl the clearest possible directions.

"If you have not the courage for an explanation there is only one thing for it—flight. Come to me here and I will keep you in safety until the time comes that your parents will thankfully admit you were wise to break your engagement. It will not be long. Only remember there must be no pursuit—the dead tell no tales."

Hildred understood. Her family were not to think of her as a fugitive, who must be hunted back and made to keep her troth. They were to believe her dead.

Mr. Bertram could hardly reproach them because his *fiancée* had preferred to take her life rather than become his wife. Her father would grieve, but no one else. He had other children to console him; and, besides, it would not be for long. Had she not "Hope's" promise that soon her parents would admit she was wise at any cost to break off her engagement?

Poor Hildred! The twenty-third of December seemed to her simply interminable in its length. Mr. Bertram left early, and she was glad to plead fatigue and retire to her own room.

Since her visit to London, Martha had removed to another room; so the bride-elect was alone with her own thoughts. First she wrote a letter, and if the one inference that she had gone forth to seek death was false, every other word in that farewell note was true as gospel.

"Dear Father,—

"I have tried hard to keep my word and marry Mr. Bertram; but I cannot do it. You would be very angry with me if I stayed here, and so I am going away. I would rather die than be his wife. Please forgive me, and think as kindly as you can of

"Hildred."

That was all. When the Rectory household were wrapped in slumber a little figure crept quietly downstairs out into the garden, and walked quickly on, not towards Rusholme, but in the direction of Chilton.

As she crossed the bridge over the river Esk Hildred dropped her heavy cloak and hat. She would miss the cloak badly on this cold winter's night; but she had a small cloth cap in her pocket which she hastily put on, and walked on hurriedly, feeling as though every step took her nearer to freedom.

She could dimly remember that years ago a woman had committed suicide from that very bridge. The river there was very deep, and the current very strong, so that her body had never been recovered. So would her friends think it was with Hildred—a nameless grave in the deep waters, that was what they would believe her fate.

Mrs. Elsinore was up betimes on that wedding morning. The ceremony was to be at eleven, and she did not intend to arouse the bride till nine o'clock; but before that hour the charwoman came in to say that Mr. Gibson was outside asking to speak to Miss Hildred.

"She's not up," said the step-mother, cheerfully, as she went out into the hall to speak to the farmer. "Shall I take her any message, Mr. Gibson?"

"Tell me she is safe at home, and that's all I want to know," he said, gruffly. "One of my men found her hat and cloak on the bridge this morning. The child has looked like a poor little ghost lately, and I'm thinking she's preferred death to the rich husband you found for her!"

Martha had rushed upstairs before he finished. She came back with an awestruck face.

"Dreda's not in her room, and—and I found this note. It's for father!"

The Rector had come out to join the anxious group. He read the poor, pitiful little note, and the tears stood in his eyes.

[AS HILDRED CROSSED THE BRIDGE SHE DROPPED HER HEAVY CLOAK AND HAT.]

"May Heaven forgive me," he said, brokenly. "She sacrificed herself for us!"

Mrs. Elsinore snatched the letter, and read it aloud. With one bitter cry her husband had gone back to his study.

"Just like Hildred," was her step-mother's verdict. "Why couldn't she have married Mr. Bertram? He did not want her to go to Australia with him. Of course, she lays the blame of everything on us, just as though we should have been the gainers."

"I'm thinking, ma'am," said Mr. Gibson, bitterly, "the poor child must have been pretty well tortured among you all for her to take her own life. She was a pretty girl, and I do believe a good one. She couldn't help it that you were poor, and it was a cruel, unwomanly thing to do to want to sell her to the first rich man who came along. Some folks may speak harshly of the poor lass for taking her own life; but the blame should be at your door really—for you drove her to it!"

He went off, and the scene of confusion that followed was indescribable. Mrs. Elsinore lost her head. Martha had to take the direction of affairs and send messengers with speed, one to the ringers lest a joyous peal should mock their distress; another to the clerk. As for the bridegroom, he arrived with a hot-house bouquet for Hildred, while her sister was debating where to send a letter to him.

The Rector and Mrs. Elsinore told him the truth; and they both agreed that, considering the deep love he had borne their lost child, he stood the blow well.

"You will admit I am innocent of this," he said earnestly. "I never dreamed she disliked me, or I should not have persisted in my suit. Why did no one give me a hint? I thought, poor little thing, she was shy and timid. I never dreamed she hated me."

The lost girl could have contradicted this statement, but her relations believed it implicitly.

"Is there anything to be done?" asked Bertram, blandly. Would you like me to go and identify the remains? It might spare you pain, Mr. Elsinore."

But they told him there would be no remains to identify. The beautiful silvery Esk kept the secret of those who gave themselves to slumber in its still waters. Gentle Hildred Elsinore would be seen no more by human eyes till the sea gave up its dead.

Every one said how beautifully Mr. Bertram bore his affliction. He was the prop and mainstay of the distressed household, sending telegram after telegram to a noted church agency in London, until at last, after first declaring it impossible at such short notice, they agreed to send a clergyman down to Little Netherton to conduct the services on Christmas Day and the following Sunday, for it was evident the Rector was too utterly broken-down even to leave the house.

"I would stay gladly if I could be of any use to you," Bertram assured Mrs. Elsinore, "but my passage to Sydney is taken, and the ship sails to-morrow. My business at the antipodes is very important; and I confess I should like to get away before my unhappy story is in every one's mouth, but if I can be of any service I will stay."

She thanked him brokenly, but declared there was nothing he could do. Everything was miserable, Hildred had wrecked their whole future.

Bertram was an astute man, and guessed she was thinking of the pecuniary difference Hildred's death would make. After such a tragedy he would not have been the first to speak on such a subject, but after the hint he had no further scruples.

"There is the thousand pounds I placed in Chilton Bank," he said, "you must dispose of that as you please. Knowing Hildred was not a woman of business I arranged it to be to her father's credit, and I can only tell you, once again, how grieved I am for the calamity I have been the innocent means of bringing on this house."

Mrs Elsinore wrote to her sister-in-law, Bessie Warrington, the next day, and she took no pains to break the news gently. She wrote it in all its horrible plainness.

"Hildred committed suicide on Christmas Eve. She was to have been married that very day to one of the most generous of men. But for the disgrace that such a sin entails on her family, I should almost feel thankful the erring girl is at rest. She was bound to be a trouble to us, and now, at least, we know the worse."

Was it a wonder that letter came as a cruel blow to the childless pair who had loved Hildred so fondly, and who had parted from her not many months before in the bloom of her innocent girlhood!

Poor Mrs. Warrington cried as one refusing to be comforted, and her husband brought his clenched fist down on the table with a bang, as he muttered,—

"May heaven only deal with that step-mother as she dealt with our poor child! Bessie, my dear, I feel as though your brother and his wife were Hildred's murderers."

And the same thought must have been at the Rector's heart, for when told of the money at the bank "to his credit" he positively refused to draw a single cheque.

"I cannot do it," he said, brokenly, to his wife, 'I feel as though it were the price of my child's blood. Poor little Hildred, your own father sinned against you, and sold you for a thousand pounds."

(To be continued.)

On account of the prevalence of intemperance among the men in Holland, women have been employed at railroad switches with great success. Not an accident has occurred since the women were installed in their unique office. If the precedent becomes established that a sober woman is a more valuable servant than a tipsy man, there will be a great revolution in the industrial world.

["SIT DOWN, IMMEDIATELY!" VIOLET SAID TO HER HUSBAND, WITH MOCK IMPETUOSITY.]

TWO WOMEN.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER that first fleeting moment of regret that Thurso had experienced in realising, perhaps a little more fully than he had yet had occasion to do, that his young wife was not wholly an angel in disposition, despite her sweet innocence and guilelessness he began to find an excuse for her petulance and vanity in recalling the incident of Hester's cold reception, and the distinctly repellent manner in which she met Violet's advances.

"My poor little love! of course she was hurt, that was it; and she was much too staunch to say anything about her disappointment. Which I know must have been pretty sharp, what an idiot I was! I might have held my tongue—no need to have chosen this particular moment for cracking up Miss Trefusis's beauty. I must make it all right with my darling. By Jove, though!"—the young man said to himself, as he lit a cigar, and went into his smoking-room to glance through the papers—"by Jove, though, she is beautiful! She must have changed a lot in these last few weeks, for she certainly did not strike me as being anything extraordinary when I saw her that day. I took her to be a rather bad-tempered uninteresting school-girl! She is no longer a school-girl now, though, and she's interesting enough for twenty women. Wonder what is going to be done with her?—seems a pity to keep her shut up in a dingy old school-house. I am sorry about to-night. If she had not been so disagreeable my little love could and would, I am sure, have tried to do something for her—something to make life pleasant for her. Well, Miss Trefusis is the loser that's very certain; and if she does not want to be friends with Violet, we can do very well without her!"

And then having ensconced himself comfortably in a particularly cosy chair, Thurso buried himself in his evening papers, and the subject of Hester passed out of his thoughts altogether.

It was recalled to him the next day, however, by Violet, who had no intention of letting her step-sister drift out of her life, not for one reason only, but for several; chief of these being that in and through Hester she held a thread of connection with Charles Maxwell. Hester's friendship for the poor creature who was to seal her life's unhappiness by becoming Maxwell's wife was not, and would not be an ephemeral thing, that Violet was perfectly sure of. She knew Hester, and she told herself with a contemptuous little laugh, that Leonore Leighton was exactly the sort of hideous dull objectionable creature for whom Hester would have a loyalty and affection passing words.

It was a curious thing with Violet that she should never hesitate in her own mind to give all due honour to Hester's actions. She sneered at this other girl's nobility, she had no desire to be as Hester was, far from it, for she unhesitatingly called her step-sister a fool, but she gave all credit to Hester's higher nature, and she did not misjudge her in her thoughts. Consequently she needed no words to be told now that the friendship Hester gave so freely, so warmly to Leonore Leighton, would not be decreased one iota when Leonore should become Lady Maxwell.

If ever Hester's services should be required—and Violet smiled grimly as she pictured to herself how quickly after the mockery of marriage that time would surely come—Leonore would not ask them in vain.

Hester would aid her, comfort her, support her unfalteringly; and then Violet's brilliant colour paled a little with that sudden contraction of jealousy at her heart, as she realized that this friendship would bring her step-sister in frequent contact with Charles Maxwell, and the admiration she had been swift to read in his eyes would be given every chance to expand and strengthen and become more significant. Hester's very coldness was in itself an incentive, and her beauty was of that calibre that marks a woman as dangerous and all-powerful in other women's estimation.

Yes, though she knew now to the full that the unrest and incipient dislike she had always felt for her stepsister had grown into positive and vehement hate. Violet determined more surely as the moments passed that she would dissemble her hate for a time at least, and force Hester to accept her offer of friendship.

There was a strong strain of the feline in Violet's nature, she was cruel in a cat-like sense, cruel with premeditation; she had always, as a child, delighted in teazing any unfortunate victim of her anger till she wearied of the torture—it had been one of the earliest causes of quarrel between the two children, this evidence of cruelty on Violet's part towards any animal or servant or living creature that offended her, and was sufficiently in her power to be made to suffer.

Hester, to whom a broken flower was parable of sorrow, and who never could endure to see anything made unhappy, had many a time and oft spoken out hot words of disgust and indignation to the pretty, yellow-haired child, whose big, blue eyes and delicate colouring had caused all beholders to pronounce her angel of loveliness.

It seemed as though Hester, and Hester alone, was gifted with this special insight into Violet's nature. With her mother and all the rest Violet could veil her cruelty as she veiled her true self, behind the mask of babyishness and innocence she carried so cunningly; but somehow she never quite deceived Hester, although, as has been shown early in the story, she managed to mystify her step-sister, and to bring up an occasional doubt, even a hope, on the surface of what Hester had almost called a conviction.

It was in fact in the broader side of her nature that Violet failed to blind Hester as

she blinded others; but in the intricacies of her cunning there were many points about her which Hester could not even imagine, much less fathom, and it was with these subtle qualities that Violet would now go to work in the vague yet passionately desired scheme of future self-satisfaction she was planning out in her mind.

After a wakeful and restless night—a most unusual circumstance with her—Violet rose, absolutely determined to devote all her energies to the task of subjugating once again the man whom she had contemptuously dismissed, afterwards despised, and after that had feared.

Now that he had come into her life, and had shown her how groundless were those fears, and how little he cared either for her remembrance or forgetfulness, Violet's abnormal vanity became a sort of astounded exasperation.

All things she could meet and endure, if it was necessary to do so, save such a thing as this. It was in fact the first, the very first blow she had ever received in her life.

Beside this sensation of anger and hot jealous indignation, all other vexations faded away. The dread and self-disgust mingled that had been wont to come in her thoughts of Maxwell, and that past episode in Paris; the irritated dislike engendered for Hester by the knowledge of her own real inferiority to her step sister, and by the other knowledge that for all her arts and all her beauty, she could never win Hester as she won other people. These, in conjunction with certain harsh thoughts and uneasiness that had circled about her mother's former life and equivocal position in the world, had been the only things that Violet could find to trouble her in her life. And even in the first and greatest of these—the memory of that old folly in Paris—there had danced and shot a delicious radiance of power and of satisfaction; for if vengeance was threatened, was not the vengeance born of love—of love that was almost a madness?

This thought had indeed given Violet solace when the aspect of that old story might have been exceedingly disagreeable; but the remembrance of her power, of her fascination over that strong, reckless man had a sweetness that overpowered the problematical bitterness, and defied the future.

Now, however, the problematical had become the calamity, the bitterness had come, and come in a way that was the most objectionable of all to Violet.

Her heart beat hurriedly, there was a feverish touch in her pulse, as she rose the next morning. She was so occupied with her thoughts, she took barely any heed of the gown she would wear, or the other details of her toilette, which usually swallowed up a good hour and a half of the early morning.

Charles Maxwell must be punished—that was the one firm resolution in her mind, the shape and substance that had formed itself out of the chaos into which her thoughts had been thrown—yes, he must be punished; he must be made to feel that her power was not to be defied in this way, that his assumed indifference and coldness would be resented most sharply.

She never doubted her power to provide this punishment, for just as she asserted to herself that his indifference was assumed, so she told herself that she should hold him once more in her merciless little hands, and give him suffering, beside which, that pain of the past would be as nothing.

Hester, too, should share in this punishment. Hester had dared to slight her, to treat her as though she were a mere nobody; and worse than this, she had dared to grow beautiful, so beautiful that her image was reflected in Maxwell's dark eyes; and even Thurso, the being who belonged body and soul to Violet, who had never before given out a single word of admiration for any other woman than his wife, even Thurso had declared Hester's beauty as an undoubted and a magnificent fact.

It was no wonder Violet found much food for thought in the new and most disagreeable aspect of affairs. She was cross beyond description; nothing her maid could do was right.

Hitherto she had taken a keen delight, as all such natures as hers do take delight, in the costly and luxurious splendour of her surroundings—in the glittering toys that crowded her table, the silken hangings and soft piled carpets and all the rest of the beautiful appointments which Thurso had scattered about the nest he had prepared with such care for his young bride; but this morning Violet saw no pleasure or beauty in any one of her possessions. She was awakened suddenly from her life of sunshine and amusement, and her first taste of disappointment and chagrined vanity was pre-eminently bitter and galling to her.

The idea of insisting on a friendship with Hester gained strength as the disagreeable sides of the picture presented themselves to her. It would be a difficult task to bring Hester into subjection, but not an impossible one.

Violet sketched out half-a-dozen different ways, but rejected them all as being unsatisfactory; till all at once a thought came to her, and a sudden smile radiated the gloom of her face.

"Of course, that will do it; why did I not think of it before?" she said to herself, and with that she flitted downstairs, and finding her husband in the hall, linked her arm in his, and drew him laughingly out into the gardens.

"I want you, Thur. Yes, I know you have hours and hours of solemn talk to go through with Symons," that was the agent of the estate; "but Symons must wait, I come first, and I want you, so come along!"

"What a tyrant!" laughed Thurso; but he let her little hands draw him willingly enough. "Now what is it your majesty requires, eh? I suppose I shall have to obey whatever your dictates may be!"

Violet laughed, and made some saucy reply, but had he noticed her keenly he would have seen that her eyes were full of some subtle fire, and that the mouth that was always smiling had a certain forced hardness in the smiles.

"I am going to give you your orders for the day," she cried, and then she grew suddenly quiet. "Thur," she said, after a little pause. "Thur, I have been thinking such a lot about poor Hester!"

Thurso held her hand closely clasped by his arm.

"What about Hester, my darling; and why do you call her 'poor?' If you called her cross and disagreeable, I think it would be nearer the mark."

"Ah!" said Violet, with a touch of sorrow in her voice that was irresistible, "ah! I see you are going to be just like all the rest. You will persist in misunderstanding Hester."

"Well," the young man confessed, frankly, "I am not gifted with extra fine sympathy, nor do I pretend to understand mysteries, so if Miss Hester behaves in what is ordinarily called a rude and ungracious manner, why——"

"Why, you must just look beyond it, that is all," Violet interrupted; she seated herself on an arm of a big rustic chair. "Hester neither intended to be rude nor ungracious. She is only sincere, that is all. She has not learnt the hard, worldly lesson that sincerity is a fault. I doubt if Hester ever will learn it. She is honesty itself, she scorns deception."

The quiet grave manner in which this speech was delivered was something so utterly unlike the usual butterfly Violet that it made her husband open his eyes wide with astonishment, while at the same time a quick rush of pleasure overwhelmed him in this the first evidence of a deeper, more thoughtful nature than he had as yet credited his young wife with possessing.

"Why, my darling! my little Solon!" he exclaimed, lightly yet tenderly. He stood holding Violet's slender hand in his, and gazed with heartfelt emotion at the delicate, dainty, almost ethereal loveliness that belonged to him and to him alone. "What thoughts are these so wise and ponderous?"

Violet looked up at him and smiled half-wistfully.

"I shall grow out of my babyhood in time. You see, Thur, dear," she said, "I am going to be a tremendously clever woman of the world, a tactician. I—I don't know what?" and then Violet lost her solemnity and burst into her ringing laugh. "Dear old goose, don't stare at me like that, but just come and sit down here and listen to all I have got to say. Do you hear me?" with mock impetuosity. "Sit down immediately. Obey me. Am I not your queen?"

"Now and always!" Thurso answered lightly; but he found himself looking at her lovely face in a questioning sort of way. For the first time a vague suspicion floated across his mind that he had by no means understood his wife's nature; and with this thought came another shaped into a delicious hope that the future after all might hold joys and pleasures which he had told himself could never be. If this one glimpse of a deeper mind beneath Violet's babyish manner were really and truly founded on fact and not on fancy, then, Thurso told himself, in all the wide big world there was not a man who could vie with him in happiness or produce a treasure to compare with his.

CHAPTER XIV.

Hester was sitting in the dusk singing to herself. She was all alone. It was two days since that evening when Lady Thurso had paid such an unexpected visit to Helmetstone School. The day following that strange event Leonore had gone to London accompanied by Miss Graham and escorted by Sir Charles Maxwell and Mr. Chetwynde. Leonore had entreated Hester to go also.

"As if I shall ever be able to choose anything without you!" declared the poor bride-elect. "I wish to goodness I need not bother about clothes at all!"

"My dear Leonore!" Miss Graham had exclaimed, greatly shocked. "This visit is imperative. Your things must be fitted on. You cannot go out as Lady Maxwell in a gown made anyhow, my dear!"

"I shall be just the same when I am Lady Maxwell as I am now!" Leonore replied. She had not a grain of snobbishness in her constitution; the fact that her future husband was the possessor of a title did not have the smallest effect on her mind—it was the man himself she worshipped so blindly, so wildly, poor creature, and not the position he would give her. "I wear bad gowns now, so why not then?—besides," with a touch of pathetic certainty, "my clothes will always look badly-made, no matter how much they cost."

Miss Graham murmured another "My dear" in a subdued sort of way, but feeling acutely the justice and honesty of this remark she made no further protest.

Hester was everything that was kind and sweet. She comforted Leonore and gave her all sorts of gentle advice, but she pleaded to be allowed to remain behind while Miss Graham and Leonore went to London.

"I feel rather tired," she said, and it was the truth. Hester was mentally tired; she had not imagined she would have felt the strain of present events so much, but she was so intensely sympathetic that she allied herself quickly to all who claimed her love, her care, her pity.

The shadow of Leonore's future was too big, too dark, too surely near for her keen senses to pass it by. Her contempt for Charles

Maxwell had developed into something more strong—a repugnance with a fear.

Hester was not skilled in the ways of the world, but she was very very quick, and the sudden feeling that was curiously like a presentiment, that had flashed into being when she had seen Violet and Maxwell meet, lingered long in her mind, and raised up a new and stronger objection to the man who was about to marry Leonore.

She was tired out with much thinking. life was not very beautiful to Hester at this moment, it was almost as though a blight had fallen on her very thoughts, a blight brought about by contact with the base and degrading influence of Maxwell's presence, and again by her fresh knowledge of Violet's falseness.

The dreams and visions that came to her so swiftly, so easily as a rule, seemed checked by the atmosphere that surrounded her. She seized, therefore, on some hours of absolute solitude, as one who is thirsty clutches at a glass of clear, cold water. If she could have only served Leonore—if at this, the eleventh hour, she could only have drawn her poor, infatuated friend away from the fire of future misery that burned so surely for her, there would have been some comfort, some joy; but to help Leonore now was hopeless, the girl herself would have been the most difficult obstacle in the way. Therefore Hester had to submit and be silent. In a little while, a few days now, Leonore would have sealed her fate, and her lot of disillusionment and unhappiness would have commenced all too soon.

The silence, brought about by this journey to London, was like a breath of fresh air to Hester. She wandered about the old house and garden, scarcely knowing where she went or why, only conscious of a great, an intense sense of pleasure and relief in her solitude, revelling like a child in the quietness, in the shadowy stillness of the deserted school-rooms and empty grounds.

To most girls of her age probably no greater punishment could be devised than two days' complete isolation. To Hester it was delicious; she grew swiftly another creature; the hours went by all too swiftly. It was not that she was glad to be rid of Leonore or of Miss Graham, only she was glad to be alone, and intensely relieved to be free of Maxwell's constant presence. She was afraid at times she made her contempt and dislike of him too pronounced in her manner and voice.

She had no wish to do this, for Leonore's sake. She felt nervous sometimes lest Leonore should be made to suffer for her sake. Her reading of Maxwell's character was so keen, so comprehensive, she prepared herself for all and any cowardly despicable act; and she knew that he knew this, though perhaps not a dozen words had passed between them.

A day went by. Hester parted with it regretfully. There were now only twenty-four hours more and then the holiday would be over. The old servants who had served Miss Graham for years were astonished by Miss Trefusis's manner in these two days. They could hear her laughing and romping with the dog, for all the world like a school-child, not the grave, quiet earnest-eyed young lady they knew and liked so well. Hester never left the grounds; she walked round about the old trees, up and down the pathways, now deep in her book, now deep in her dreams, and every now and then stopping to talk some tender nonsense to the terrier who followed her like a shadow.

Then when evening drew nigh, on this second day, Hester went into the drawing-room, with its quaint stiff arrangements, its rug-worked cushions, and miniature water-colours framed on the walls, trophies of bygone victorious pupils, and she sat down to the old piano and sang softly to herself. Music was a passion with her, and her voice, always promising well, had developed marvellously with the few lessons she had received since she had come to Miss Graham's excellent school; she sang, as Sir Charles Maxwell had declared, exquisitely, with a note of intense sympathy which would have been valuable even in an indifferent voice, but which with her rich low organ was almost divine in its power and beauty.

The dog lay curled up on the skirt of her gown. Hester gazed dreamily about the dusk of the room; she was in shadow-land, but she was happy. She was very far away, indeed, from the earth as she had know it; she was soaring in a world of her own, a world of dreams, delicious fancies, of——

The door opened suddenly. Hester gave a sharp start, her hands closed on a chord that her fingers had been forming, and the old terrier gave a sleepy growl. Out of the dusk came the voice of the housemaid,—

"Lord Thurso, if you please, miss." Then came the sound of a closed door, then the foot-fall of some vaguely outlined form; then Dane, the terrier, rose with another growl; and then Hester found herself shaking hands with this tall individual and heard Lord Thurso speaking hurriedly,—

"I beg your pardon, Miss Trefusis, I am afraid I am disturbing you. I——" Thurso was a little nervous for the moment; he could just see Hester's pale clear-cut face with those two big eyes gazing out of their setting like two magnificent and mysterious jewels.

"I was a little startled at first," Hester replied, and her voice was not quite so even as usually; "but—but I think I was in dreamland. It is very dark. I will ring for some light." She made her way to the bell as she spoke, and touched it quickly.

Thurso answered her very swiftly.

"If that is the sort of music you find in dreamland, it must be very like heaven," he said, and then he blushed all over his handsome face; but Hester could not see the blush, nor, to his great relief, did she seem to find anything strange in his words.

She was standing a little away from him.

"You like music, then?" she asked, and he thought suddenly to himself that even the sound of her speaking voice was delicious to hear; then, before he could answer, she went on, and she laughed a little this time. "It is very dark. I hope you will please pardon this, Lord Thurso. We shall have the gas. Oh, here is Margaret. Will you kindly light the gas please, Margaret."

Thurso was almost sorry when a beam of yellow gas was let loose upon the apartment.

Miss Graham did not advance very much with the times, she had no soft-hued shades or graceful lamps in her drawing-room. She had been used to gas all her life, and she would use it on to the end of that life.

Gas, therefore, in what Violet would have called its "unmitigated hideousness," was the illumination that chased out the shadows and the dusk, and revealed all the primitive ornaments and stiff-backed furniture that filled the room.

It revealed also all the glories of the girlish beauty that had so impressed Thurso on seeing it the other evening.

"It is rather cold to-night. I think we might have had a fire Dane, and I," Hester said, as the servant withdrew and they were alone again.

She was wondering a little what had brought him there. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps he had come to see the mistress of the house on some business.

"Miss Graham is at present away from home, she will be back to-morrow afternoon," she said.

"Oh, I did not come to see Miss Graham," Lord Thurso answered.

Her manner was so charming that he felt assured his mission would be a success, and he would return triumphantly to his little love and make her perfectly contented.

"I came to see you, Miss Trefusis," he added.

Hester turned her big eyes upon him questioningly.

"I walked here," Thurso went on, hurriedly, "and I am going to walk back; it is a lovely night, it might be July instead of September."

Hester felt the pause that followed was a little awkward to him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Lord Thurso?" she asked, gently.

She found great pleasure in letting her eyes rest upon the fine, good-looking young fellow before her. There was that about him that was eminently attractive to her. In a measure he reminded her of his uncle; but, of course, the likeness was only faint, and was rather a resemblance of voice than of face.

Thurso suddenly met her beautiful eyes with his own frank, honest ones.

"Yes, Miss Trefusis, I want something. You must regard me as a suppliant."

She smiled, but put no question to him.

He leaned forward a little. The dog had begun to make great friends with him, and had seated himself between the young man's legs.

Thurso's hands went out gently to the animal's head, and he stroked the sage old face as he looked across at Hester.

"We want you to be friends with us, please," he said, and there was something irresistibly charming in his voice and words.

Hester's brows contracted sharply for an instant; she was astonished by this—astonished beyond measure.

She had not thought that Violet would have desired any sort of intercourse with her, and in fact she had gone very nearly to the truth of the reason that had made Lady Thurso condescend to a visit two nights before.

Of course, Hester did not guess the absolute truth, for knowledge of such truths was not fortunately possible to her; but she had said to herself that for some purpose or other Lady Thurso had wished to meet Sir Charles Maxwell again, and consequently she had planned a visit to her step-sister in order to bring this meeting about.

This offer of friendship put to her by one whom she felt, though she had no acquaintance with him, she yet could not mistrust, surprised her and pained her.

She desired nothing in the world so much as to trust all people, believe all people; but experience and discrimination had forced her to doubt Violet, to weigh everything Violet did in the balance as it were, and sort out a motive for what might appear to be a most commonplace action. Now, though she was certain of Lord Thurso's sincerity, she was equally doubtful of his young wife's.

She was silent so long that Thurso's face fell, and the bright, eager look faded from it.

"Do you find it so very hard then?" he asked, and his voice was a little cold.

"I—I am a little surprised," Hester said, truthfully.

"Surprised because I have come to you instead of Violet?"

Hester did not reply immediately; she rose and moved about slowly—a habit with her when she had anything on her mind.

Thurso watched her admiringly.

"By Jove! she is beautiful, and no mistake. My little love is quite right, she is much too good to be shut up here for everlasting. I rather fancy she would make a sensation in the world with that proud air, and those two wonderful eyes. Wonder why she is so jolly difficult and staud-offish? Of course I know she and Mrs. Campbell didn't pull together. But Violet?—she could not help loving Violet. And——" And then Thurso remembered something, and began speaking quickly.

"Oh! perhaps I ought to tell you first, Miss Trefusis—how stupid I am! I always forget the most important thing; and my wife was so particular about it, too." Thurso paused. "Look here, please forgive me for speaking out bluntly; but I have heard you—you were not very happy with Mrs. Campbell. Well, Violet said I was to be sure and

tell you that her mother will not be with us; she is going to live abroad—she has gone away, in fact, this very morning. She would go, although I pressed her to stay; but Violet thought it might make things smoother for you if you were to know this. I do hope you will let me take back a pleasant answer, Miss Trefusis."

The young man looked at her pleadingly.

"You don't know how eager my little wife is that things should be nice between herself and you. She quite fretted the other night, when—" and then Thurso paused; he could not speak out exactly what he had in his mind, which was, "when you were so confoundedly disagreeable to her!" but his pause conveyed enough to his hearer.

Hester was troubled and vexed too: troubled because his eagerness touched her; vexed because she felt so surely that Violet was working for some end of her own in this matter, and that it was not a good one.

"Oh! if I could only believe her; if I could only trust her!" she said to herself. But that was just what Hester could not do, for she knew, alas! that Violet was absolutely untrustworthy. She found it was imperative to say something.

"Why did not Violet come to me herself?" she asked, still moving restlessly about.

"Because she was afraid you would be cross with her, and because she thought you would perhaps listen to me in this matter rather than to her."

Hester paused and, took up a book involuntarily. She opened it, shut it, replaced it; still words would not come. Thurso rose; he was vexed with her, she felt it instinctively rather than saw it, and at one and the same moment she felt a pang go through her. It hurt her to disappoint him or vex him. She had strangely enough the same kind of feeling for this stalwart, splendid-looking young man as she had for poor, ugly, uninteresting Leonore Leighton. Both touched her pity, both seemed to appeal to that fount of warm womanliness and deepest sympathy which lay hidden in her heart. She seemed to feel the shadow of a sorrow drawing over his handsome head, just as in a greater degree of conviction she foresaw the cloud of disaster and misery that was gathered heavily on the horizon of Leonore's married life. And then back across her memory came all the old recollections, all the tender words she had heard spoken in loving admiration of "the boy Thurso," all the quickly answering sympathies she had given to this "boy" whom she had never seen, but whom she had seemed to know so well. She felt a rush of remorse that she should have been the means of that disappointed look on his face—she who could not bear to hurt any living creature. She put out her hand with a sudden impulse.

"I am afraid you must think me very ungracious," she said, hurriedly and a little wistfully.

Thurso held her hand delightedly.

"This means you are going to be kind and do what we ask?"

Hester smiled up at him faintly.

"If my friendship is a pleasure to you, it shall be your's," she answered.

"You are a brick!" Thurso cried; he was now radiant again. "Violet will be so delighted. She was afraid perhaps you would visit Mrs. Campbell's sins on our heads; and you know"—with a frank laugh—"and you know, Miss Trefusis, that would be rather hard lines, now wouldn't it, eh? Well, we won't say anything more about the matter; we will put all disagreeables behind us and start afresh. You must please remember from to-night that I am your brother, and, if you need anything a man can do, you will come to me, I hope."

"You are very, very kind," Hester said gently. Every word he spoke, every gesture, every look drew her more closely towards him. He stood before her now the embodiment of all dead George Campbell's loving pride and trust.

"Dick is true through and through," the dead man had said to her over and over again, "he could not do a mean deed or think a dishonourable thought. He is a splendid boy with a heart that would be no disgrace to any woman—yet with a nature that is manliness itself. If I could have had a son, Hester, I would have counted myself a proud man to have such a boy as Thurso."

Swift as lightning this rose to the girl's mind as she stood with her hand clasped in his, and then she gave an irrepressible shiver as she remembered next the fate that had overtaken him. He was Violet's husband. Hester would have gladly set her heel on the disquieting doubts that came at that thought, but instinct, apart from knowledge, was too strong, and the greater her sense of pleasure at contact with this man's true, honest, good nature, the greater the sense of regret at the mistaken marriage he had made.

"I am not a bit kind. I am only glad!" Thurso said, boyishly. "You know I do hate to be beat, and you know you looked awfully stern when I first came in, Hester—may I call you Hester? I was afraid you would never listen to me, and then what should I have said to my wife?"

Thurso had a conscious pride in pronouncing those two last words that was pretty to hear.

"Violet wishes to see me very much?" Hester asked quietly, as she drew her hand away from his.

"She has set her heart on having you with us as much as possible, and so I hope you will come. We must try and give you some pleasure."

"Pleasure and I are not meant to be well acquainted, I fear, Lord Thurso," the girl said, with a fleeting smile—she paused a moment—"but I will come and see you sometimes."

She was deeply touched by his offer of brotherly friendship. She felt that the words had not been lightly spoken or lightly meant. It was against her wisdom, against her inclination, that she let herself be drawn into this whim of Violet's; which might be only a whim, to be tired of and tossed on one side in a very short while, or might be a deeper, firmer rooted plan. The whole of Hester's being seemed to rise and warn her at this moment that it was no idle motive that urged her step sister to seek her, to force her as it were to be friends. It was not like Violet; she had never sought Hester in the past; she had occasionally foisted herself on Hester for half-an-hour or so, but this brief period of time had generally been so deadly dull and uninteresting to her that Violet had been only too glad to detach herself once more and float off to some other more congenial amusement.

Why, then, did Violet seek her now so swiftly and so persistently? A thousand doubts surged in Hester's mind, and at the last she was just resolved to take back her words and to tell Thurso, coldly but quietly, that she would rather be allowed to go her own way undisturbed, when he spoke again.

"Now we have got so far, I will proceed to the rest of my business," he said, and he produced a pocket-book as he spoke. "Isn't it odd how things come about in life? As I was leaving the house to walk here, I met one of the grooms with the late letter bag. I stopped him to see if there was anything important, and I found a letter from my sister Allie." He slipped the note-case back into his pocket, retaining the letter of which he spoke.

"I have not heard from Allie for ever so long, and I have been anxious about her, as she is not the strongest individual in the world, and she has been up in Scotland nursing my other sister. Well, to cut a long story short, Hester,—you see how easily I say it?" with a laugh—"this letter is all about you; and there is an enclosure which Allie asks me to give you as soon as possible, not knowing where to find you herself. Now, isn't this an extraordinary circumstance? just like something in a novel, by Jove!"

Hester took the little note he held out to her.

"I will read it now," she said, not quite steadily.

She did not know until this moment how deeply she had felt Lady Alice Carne's silence, for, though she had not known the contents of the letter she had given into Thurso's charge that bygone day, she had felt sure they had some connection with herself, and she had hoped all this time for some sort of sign from the girl about whom, in common with her brother, Hester had heard so much.

The note was very short, but very sweet to the reader of it, who had hungered and thirsted for some such tenderness all her young life.

"My dear, dear Uncle George has written to me, dear Hester Trefusis, to ask me to be kind to you, to be a friend to you as much as ever lies in my power. Thank you—oh! thank you for all your goodness to him. I feel that I love you because you loved him and he loved you. We must indeed be friends. I hope we shall meet before very long. I should have written to you weeks ago had I received poor Uncle George's letter; but it was sent by my brother to a wrong address, and it has been lying unopened all this time. Do forgive me, dear Hester, and will you write to me and tell me anything you can about my uncle. I was so fond of him; and, oh! I am so sorry I did not see him before he died. Thurso will give you this, and you and he will be good friends too, I hope. You do not seem a stranger to me, so you must not be a stranger to my brother. I should like so much to know something about you, what you are doing, and if you are well and happy. Please write soon, and think of me always as your sincere and affectionate friend,

"Alice Carne."

There were tears in Hester's dark eyes as she came to the end of this girlish, yet most earnestly sweet little epistle.

"I think you must read this," she said to Thurso, hurriedly, and he obeyed her; and as he finished it he took both her hands in his.

"Now there can be no more doubt. You must be our friend, Hester. You are bequeathed to us, for Allie and I always act together. Poor old Uncle George, dear old chap, he was such a good sort. That sounds slang, but you know what I mean."

He was speaking very fast, for there was a suspicious mist rising up over his eyes as remembrance of his uncle came back to him.

"As Allie says, you can't be a stranger to us. You were good to Uncle George, and he tells us to love you and to call you friend. It won't be very difficult, will it, Hester? I think—don't you, dear?—that we shall be good, true friends now and always."

And Hester, looking up at him through her tears, forgot all the doubts that had crowded her mind a moment before.

The emotion that came now was so sweet, so beautiful, it banished all other feelings; and she remembered only that at one touch she had been given a brother and sister who would prove no ephemeral friends, but staunch, true, and loyal to the very end.

(To be continued.)

Chinese domestics in San Francisco, when quitting a situation, have an unpleasant habit of leaving a character of their mistress for the benefit of their successors. Many a mistress has been puzzled to guess why her "China-boys" forsake her so soon, until one day she discovers some odd writing inscribed behind a mirror, or under a table in the kitchen; and, when she gets a neutral Celestial to interpret the writing, she often finds sufficient harsh criticisms on her housekeeping to account for the sudden departure of her servants.

A PLAYTHING OF FORTUNE.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Brenda stood there facing her husband's supposed wife like a stone. There was not a particle of expression in her cold, gray face. It seemed immovable as iron.

She made such a picture in her simple, old-fashioned bonnet, her grayish hair and stony expression, that she made an impression upon Violet. The woman of fashion went up to her swiftly and put her hand on the nurse's arm.

"Tell her that she is altogether wrong, Miss French," exclaimed Violet, in her sweetest tone. "Mrs. Cass is my cousin, my first cousin, almost my sister. Her little ones are as dear to me as they are to her. Do you think, then, that I should remain away from them because my husband happens to have an adopted son? It is absurd, is it not? And you will tell her so, won't you, Miss French?"

A shudder seemed to pass upward over Brenda's entire form. It was a wonder to her ever afterward how she bore it.

Then, too, there was the thought of her child, her own little one whose welfare was so lightly considered. How was she to prevent his exposure to that dread disease? It seemed to chill her to the very marrow of her bones.

She tried with all her frail might to make her voice sound natural as she replied, but it seemed cold and stiff, in a singular accord with her curious appearance.

"I think Mrs. Cass is right," she answered, heavily. "Common humanity should make us protect a child, whether we love it or not. You can do these little ones no good, and you may take the germs of infection back to that—other one. You would not like to feel that your own rashness had occasioned his death, would you?"

A hard expression came into Violet's countenance, and a peculiar gleam darkened her eyes for a moment.

"He will not die," she said, coldly. "Since you will not let me see the children, May, perhaps you will take them these flowers with my love."

She laid a bunch of roses in her cousin's hand as she spoke, and turned away. Mrs. Cass sprang to her side.

"Dear Violet," she cried, "you must not be offended. I have only refused for your own good. You think the baby would not take it, as I thought May and Dick would not, but you see they have."

"But there is not the necessity for my going to that child that there is for your being beside yours."

"I never thought of that before," said Mrs. Cass, relenting.

"I rarely ever see him. If I promise you that I will not visit the nursery for days afterwards, will you let me see them?"

"Under those conditions—yes."

She was about to lead the way, but some mother-intuition made Brenda understand the thought that was poisoning Violet's brain. She stepped quickly forward, and, regardless of her position, spoke earnestly, almost wildly.

"Don't do it!" she cried. "Don't for the love of Heaven! How can you tell what may happen? He may be going out as you go in, and you may meet him. There are so many ways that you might give it to him. Don't go, I beg of you. Surely you don't want to be responsible to Heaven for that little life? Mrs. Cass, don't allow it, I entreat you!"

Violet looked at the woman coldly, then turned to Mrs. Cass and in a subdued tone, sufficiently loud for Brenda to hear, she said,—

"It is only overzeal in her profession, my dear May. They are all like that. An odd lot. Come!"

She herself pushed open the door before Mrs. Cass could reply, and with that expression of regret and hesitation still on her face, Mrs. Cass followed.

If she had dared, Brenda would have held them back with main strength, but she saw how hopeless she was.

"I believe she is trying to give the disease to my child!" she gasped. "Heaven forgive me if I wrong her, but what could that expression in her eyes have meant? She hates the child. Oh, Heaven! what am I to do to save his life?"

She was still standing with her hands closely clasped, a wild, hunted look in her face, when Doctor Hastings rejoined her.

"The little girl May is very ill," he said, hurriedly. "I am afraid there is little hope of—What is the matter, Miss French? What has happened?"

"That lady who went in there," she gasped—Warrender—she ought not to have gone. Her husband has a son, and——"

She paused, unable to continue. Doctor Hastings took her hands and held them soothingly.

"And you have allowed yourself to become so excited over that? You will never do for a nurse if you do such things—never! You must have more self-control. Why, Mrs. Warrender is the cousin of Mrs. Cass. They are as intimate as sisters, and it is only natural that she should want to see the children She has promised me to disinfect herself, and then take the precaution not to allow that little fellow to be brought into the same part of the house she is in. There is very little danger. That comes from not knowing when you have been near infection."

"But are you sure she will do it?"

"Why, what an absurd question! Do you think she would wilfully endanger the child's life? You must not be so foolish. I am afraid you have not taken a very strong liking to Mrs. Warrender. Come with me. I want to introduce you to Miss Graham and your two little patients."

She was still trembling, but not to any noticeable extent, when she entered the room where she found May in Mrs. Warrender's arms.

The small face was flushed with the terrible fever, and occasionally the child moaned as if in pain. She was too ill to notice anyone, even the heart-broken mother who bent above her.

Then Brenda and Miss Graham were named to each other.

Miss Graham held out her hand and drew Brenda to the other end of the room.

"I hope we shall get on very well together," she said, kindly. "Doctor Hastings tells me that you have had no experience, but I am sure you will soon learn. There are three of us—you, Miss Vance, and myself. Miss Vance is the night nurse, and you will have to assist both of us. I am not sure but that you have the most difficult place to fill. It will come hard to you just at first, but we will both do for you what we can. That child will die."

"You mean the one in Mrs. Warrender's arms?"

"Yes."

"Then one ought not to blame her for coming even at the expense of the other child," sighed Brenda.

"Blame who—Mrs. Warrender? Pouf! She cares no more for that child than she does for me. It is not in her. She doesn't care for anyone except herself. Look at her. Does distress over death ever take that expression on a woman's face?"

But Brenda dared not look. She feared she would cry out or do something that would betray her. She turned hurriedly to the nurse, and cried almost incoherently,—

"May I not see the other one—the boy who is not so ill?"

"Not now. He is sleeping and we don't want him disturbed. What's the matter? Are you nervous?"

"Yes. It is the thought of that poor little helpless child that is to be subjected to this horrible disease that is killing me!"

"It is dreadful, isn't it? But you must not be so emotional. Why, as a nurse, you would go to an insane asylum in a month if you allowed things to affect you like that. You must harden yourself. Sympathy is al very well in its way, but unless you know how to control it, you will never be successful in the profession you have chosen. Look at that child. Do you see that pinched expression coming about the nose? That means death! I am glad Doctor Hastings is here."

Brenda glanced in the direction of the child, but her eyes caught the expression of Violet's face before they reached the countenance of the baby. The woman of fashion seemed absolutely not to see the little form she was holding. For the moment she had forgotten herself, and a smile that was diabolical hovered about her crimson lips. If love for the child had caused her to enter the sick-room, it was a curious way that she had of displaying it.

She waited until the end had come, until the anguished mother had been forcibly taken from the room, and then she left quietly.

She had really liked the pretty baby, but she could neither think of that, nor her grief for the dead, nor her sorrow for the living, in the intensity of another feeling.

The same cruel smile was upon her lips as she stepped into her carriage and ordered the coachman home. She took no note of time, and was astonished when the carriage stopped before her own door. Her lips moved as she mounted the step.

"I shall have my revenge at last!" she muttered.

As she was about to ring, the door was opened from the inside, and Agnes Blunt, with the child in her arms, stood there.

Violet hesitated for a moment; she turned white even to the lips; then a sudden resolution darkened her eyes.

She took the baby from Agnes and held him closely, touching the red lips with her white, trembling ones, after which she returned him to his nurse without a word.

It was the kiss of Judas.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Bessie was in her favourite place upon the lawn, seated in her indispensable invalid's carriage. A letter, covering four sides of note-paper, and written in huge English hand, lay neglected upon her lap. Her hands were folded together, and her eyes were fixed upon the softly moving leaves above her.

She was motionless as a statue, but there was an expression of suffering in her countenance that those who ran might read.

It struck Darcy Brooke painfully, as he stood watching her for a moment before approaching her. Then he spoke her name lightly, that he might not startle her.

"Bessie."

She turned to him and smiled without surprise, as if she had expected to hear the sound of his voice.

"Well?"

"I thought I should find you here," he said, carelessly, throwing his hat upon the grass and seating himself near her. "It was very good of you to anticipate my coming."

"Have you heard anything?"

"Not yet."

"I have."

"What?"

"Violet and Lionel have arrived."

Brooke started violently. He did not speak for a long time, but sat there with his troubled eyes fixed upon her; but his voice was very quiet when he broke the silence at last.

"When did they come?"

"They were a week earlier than expected, and arrived several days ago. My mother says she was too busy to write before. Lionel is coming up here."

"When?"

"She did not say. She merely writes that he asked for me at once, and expressed the intention of making me a visit."

"It is so much better that Brenda is not here; don't you think so?"

"I don't know," she cried, passionately. "I wish to Heaven I did! Do you believe that he would desire not to know?"

"He must not know!" exclaimed Brooke, "at least, not yet. I don't know what course we ought to pursue in the matter. I have put it to my conscience in a thousand different ways, and I cannot determine."

Bessie sighed.

She was silent, because there seemed nothing that she could say upon the subject that she had not already said.

Brooke was watching her closely. For a moment he forgot their terrible embarrassment in looking at her.

Her face was thin, but how beautiful the lines were! There was a certain sallowness of complexion that illness had brought, but there was no woman of his acquaintance who could boast of such hair or more beautiful eyes. Her little, thin hands were lying folded over each other upon her lap. How helpless and appealing they appeared! The expression of sorrow had crept back to her eyes again. How he would have delighted to soothe her! Yet there was an odd sensation of timidity suddenly born in his heart.

He felt shy, and as if she in reality were the stronger of the two. It was a curious feeling which he could not quite understand.

"Bessie," he said, at last, unable to endure the silence longer, "what are you thinking of?"

She coloured slightly.

"Of many things, vaguely," she answered, evasively. "I think I am going back to town Mr. Brooke. My mother and Violet are going to Brighton soon now. I shall remain at the town house during their absence."

His countenance fell.

"What is that for?" he asked, in a tone of disappointment. "Because Brenda has gone?"

"Perhaps," she answered. "This place has grown unbearable to me."

"But what shall I do?" he asked, boyishly. "I could not endure it now without you. I should have to close up my establishment and go back to town, also."

He laughed a little at his own remark, but Bessie grew painfully red.

"I hope you will not!" she cried, with suspicious earnestness.

"Why?" he asked, quickly.

"Because," she stammered, weakly—"because it is so hot there—at this season—and——"

She stopped, unable to continue, and glanced at him helplessly.

"Is it because you wish to avoid me that you want to go, Bessie?" he asked. "If it is——"

"Oh, don't!" she interrupted, with a gesture of pain. "You don't understand, and I can't explain to you. I must go—I must! I can't stand everything. I——"

She stopped again in horror of herself. She looked at him, and her expression betrayed everything.

Darcy Brooke was not a vain man, but he would have been blind not to have read that helpless, appealing, piteous glance. It told him everything. He was able to read between the lines of Brenda's letter at last. He understood what she meant. Brenda knew that Bessie—poor, unfortunate, helpless, beautiful Bessie—loved him.

The line of her note to Bessie flashed through his brain,—

"There is a day in the far future, which I foresee, when I shall return to you."

He understood that. He knew now why she had begged of him to be kind and tender to Bessie. It was Brenda's wish that he should learn to love her little friend. There was something curiously piteous—something beautiful to him in the thought.

Had Bessie been a strong girl, able to flit about as others do, he might have hated her for the very thought; but there she sat before him, a hopeless cripple, denied all the beauties of life that others enjoy, noble, uncomplaining—loving him.

His eyes filled with tears.

She had turned her gaze from him, and did not see his emotion. She was trembling like a leaf, and he could see it even before his lips had touched her hand.

"Don't go, Bessie," he said to her, tenderly. "I should not know how to get along without you, dear. Stay here in this sweet country where we have become so essential to each other, for—my sake, will you not?"

He had not meant to say so much. It had never occurred to him that he ever could ask her to be his wife, but he regretted nothing when he saw the joyous light that flashed into her pretty face.

She did not reply at once. She seemed to yield herself to the happiness that his words inspired for a moment, then a slight shiver passed over her. Her face took on an additional paleness. She was striving to control herself, but it was a difficult undertaking and one in which she was not altogether successful.

"It is very good of you to want me," she said, quietly, her smile very wan and feeble. "You must not think that I do not appreciate it, for no one ever thought me essential to him or her before. But you will not mind in a day or two. There are so many others who will be pleasanter companions for you than I could be."

"You are determined to go?"

"It is better that I should."

"Then I shall go, too."

"You are very foolish. The city will be hot and uncomfortable, and——"

"No more for me than for you. Allow me to choose my own pleasure, won't you? Bessie, why did you wish to escape me?"

It had come to him then. A beautiful sacrifice, he called it. His life was worth so little to him. Might he not make it of benefit to this noble, suffering girl? He foresaw so clearly all that she must undergo when she learned the truth which she already suspected about Brenda. He knew that the world would cut her because of the misfortune that had befallen her sister. And he knew that he could save every pang by making her his wife.

Why should he hesitate? He had already said too much to withdraw now; for he would bring no additional sorrow into her unhappy, afflicted life, let the cost be to him what it might.

There was no hope of his ever learning to love another woman as he had loved Brenda; but he realized that, as the acknowledged or disowned wife of his friend, the indulgence of that love was a dishonour to him. Might it not be a thousand times better if he put another and a stronger barrier between them? Would that not be a curb even upon his own heart?

But self was a minor consideration with Brooke in this idea that had come to him. His whole heart was overflowing with sympathy for his afflicted little friend, and the whole world acknowledges how closely akin pity is to love.

The laugh that fell from Bessie's lips was tremulous, almost discordant. It never once occurred to her what his intentions were. She only saw that he was sorry for her—nothing more.

"How foolish you are!" she said, with an assumption of lightness, "Why should you think that I wish to escape you?"

"Because your words show it. Listen to me for a moment, dear, and exercise your imagination. Let me ask you a question: Supposing—mind, I don't say that any of this is true—but suppose that I should get my back broken, so that I could never arise from my couch, and suppose a girl loved me very dearly, and I loved her, would you not think she was doing right if she came to me and told me that she loved me? Would you not think such a marriage to be the sweetest, purest thing Heaven ever put into the hearts of Earth's children!"

She was trembling violently. She understood now. For a moment a great rush of gladness filled her, to the exclusion of every other feeling, then that generosity which was the strongest thing in her nature surged over all.

"I should think you were mad to accept such a sacrifice!" she cried, passionately. "I should call you cruel to allow her to give her strong young life to you when you were nothing but a useless clod. I should despise you for your weakness, as she would despise you in the end."

"Then that imaginary girl could never love the imaginary me as I love you, Bessie."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The beautiful, poetic, noble sacrifice was made, and Darcy Brooke did not regret it. He did not love her as he loved Brenda—how could he, when that love was still throbbing in his heart as warmly as it had done upon the day when he told her of it?—but he was willing—nay, eager to give to Bessie all the young life that was thrilling through his veins. It was a pleasure to him to think of caring for her all the days that were her allotment—to know that she would depend upon him alone.

He could not have asked her to be his wife if she had been well and strong; but as it was, he seemed to revel in the thought of it. He felt toward her something as a father does toward his favourite and afflicted child.

And she?

It seemed to her that her very soul was trembling with ecstasy. She loved him with every atom of the strength of her strong nature. She absolutely adored him for the sacrifice that he was willing to make for her; but she would no more have thought of allowing him to link his life to her useless one than she would have asked Heaven to give her the sun from the skies as a diadem.

He had taken both her hands in one of his. She lifted them until her lips rested upon it, then she gently withdrew her own.

There were tears in her eyes, tears in her voice, as she said, with apparent irrelevance:

"Did you ever read Mrs. Browning's 'Denial'? Don't answer but listen." She leaned forward and took the little volume from the floor of the carriage, and in the bitterest, saddest, most heart-forlorn tone that he had ever heard, she read,—

"'We have met too late—it is too late to meet,
Oh, friend, not more than friend!
Death's forecome shroud is tangled round my feet,
And if I step or stir, I touch the end.
In this last jeopardy
Can I approach thee—I, who cannot move?
How shall I answer thy request for love?
Look in my face and see!

"'I love thee not; I dare not love thee! Go
In silence; drop my hand.
If thou seek roses, seek them where they blow—
In garden alleys, not in desert sand.
Can life and death agree,
That thou shouldst stoop thy song to my complaint?
I cannot love thee. If the word is faint,
Look in my face and see!

"'I might have loved thee in some former days,
Oh! then my spirits had leapt,
As now they sink, at hearing thy love-praise,
Before these faded cheeks were overwept,

Had this been asked of me:
To love thee with my whole strong heart and head,
I should have said still, yes; but smiled and said:
Look in my face and see!'"

She had meant to deceive him, but the reading of those verses would have told him all, even had he not known it before, there was such yearning, such anguish, such regret and despair.

She would have gone on reading, but he put his strong hand beneath her chin and forcibly turned her face toward him. There was something almost heavenly in the self-sacrificing affection that filled his heart for her.

"If you could have loved me in the happy days, why not now, dear heart?" he asked, gently. "Let me 'look in your face and see.' It is not true. You do love me, little one. Look in my face and tell me that you do not."

She shivered and closed her eyes. He had slipped his arm around her, and she was leaning against his breast, powerless to move herself, even had she desired to do so.

"Oh! it is madness!" she whispered—"the veriest madness! I would as soon think of tying the stone around your neck that would sink you to perdition as doing that which you ask. Do you think I do not realize all the sweetness of your heroic sacrifice? I thank you from my very soul for what you have said, but I cannot accept it!"

"Why, Bessie?"

She quoted from memory:

"'Could Love's great harmony
The Saints keep step to when their bonds are loose,
Not weigh me down? Am I a wife to choose?
Look in my face and see!'"

"The only wife whom I should choose—whom I shall ever choose, Bessie?" he said, earnestly. "Do you mean that you intend to cut yourself adrift from the sweetest companionship that the world holds—from that union invented for man by Heaven itself—because an affliction has been sent upon your life? Ah! surely you, who are denied the rights that the more fortunate possess, need love all the more. Why should you take upon yourself an affliction greater than Heaven has seen fit to send?"

"It is not myself that I have to consider, but you!" she cried, passionately. "You know and understand it all so well. You know that, in spite of my mother, of my sister and my fortune, that the veriest beggar is not so lonely and alone as I; and you are sorry—so sorry that you would take upon yourself the burden that I am destined to bear alone. But I will not let you. I am not so cowardly as that. I can bear to suffer, but I could not bear to see you suffer."

"Then it is not because you do not love me, Bessie? It is because you love me so much."

He smiled down into her great haggard eyes—smiled as he might have done in trying lovingly to persuade a rebellious child.

"As well one as the other," she answered, despairingly. "What difference can it make, when the result must be the same?"

"All the difference in the world, because it won't be the same. If I believed it true that you do not love me, then I should go away from you for ever. There will never be a day when I shall not repeat my question until you promise to become my wife; for you do love me, do you not? Dear one, let me 'look in your face and see.'"

He was still smiling at her in an indulgent way. She started up passionately, as if she could bear no more.

"Oh, surely I have enough to endure without this!" she cried, sharply. "It would be useless to lie to you. You have read my pitiful secret, which I would have given words to conceal. Heaven was not satisfied with tying me up as a helpless cripple for the remainder of my worthless life, but it must send me this humiliation. I am deeply grateful to you, but I can't do it! I can't take advantage of your pity for my loneliness. For Heaven's sake, go!"

"I will not!" he exclaimed, firmly. "It is all the most useless absurdity. I shall be no good either to Heaven or myself if you send me away."

"You will grow to despise me!"

"Let me stay until you are convinced that I never shall. Let us remain as we are, if you will, without pledge between us, until you have tested me to your satisfaction. I do not fear it. Surely, you cannot hesitate to do that, Bessie."

"Oh, if I could but believe it true!" she cried. "If I could but think that Heaven intended a happiness such as that to make amends to me for all that I have suffered, for all that I must suffer, I should be willing to go on to the end of time, enduring any torture with never a murmur of complaint, never a thought of rebellion, but only gratitude and thanksgiving!"

The tone told him so much more than the words, strong as they were, that tears filled his eyes, again and this time rolled down his cheeks

He took her in his arms and kissed her upon the lips.

"Dear little Bessie," he said, softly, "it is our betrothal, in spite of you. Heaven has ordained that you shall be my wife, and there is nothing you can say against it to which I shall listen. There is nothing more pure in heaven than my love for you. Put both your hands in mine and tell me that you believe it, dear."

She obeyed him, and lifted her eyes to his, shining with a holy light.

"I believe you," she said, softly; "and in believing, my affliction has changed to a glory."

He bowed his head above her hands, and in silence asked Heaven's blessing upon the sacrifice he had made.

Did Heaven ever refuse to hear a prayer like that?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Darcy Brooke had gone.

There was not in all the hosts of Heaven a happier soul than Bessie as she sat alone there in the dusk and twilight. The trees were making long shadows that reached up and ingulfed her. The flowers on the other side were but dimly visible, bending gracefully under the gentle breeze like the old fashioned court beauties to harmonious strains of the stately minuet. A bird was whistling a good-night to the day in the tree above her, blissfully breaking the sweet silence of nature.

She leaned back in her little carriage, watching it all with a dreamy smile upon her lips that made her strangely lovely. All the petulance had gone from her great violet eyes, leaving only happiness and thanksgiving behind.

"I don't deserve it," her heart sung out to the tune of the bird's song. "I don't deserve it, but thank Heaven for it! Thank Heaven! Why should all this great joy be sent into my life, I who have borne my burden so impatiently? It can't be true! It can't be true! And yet it is. Thank Heaven! Thank Heaven!"

That was the sweet refrain, the grateful ending of every thought.

Mary, her little maid, had come to her twice to take her in, but each time Bessie had shaken her head.

"Wait a little," she said. "Go in and leave me. The night is so exquisite. I shall blow the whistle when I need you."

She had closed her eyes, and was listening to the end of the bird's song, listening while a blissful memory was hovering over all her senses, bathing them in the sunshine of ecstasy, when the sound of a quick footfall upon the gravel walk aroused her.

She opened her eyes and glanced up hastily.

Her visitor had evidently not seen her, and was going onward with bowed head toward the house, when in the faint gray light she recognized him.

"Lionel!" she cried—"Lionel, is it you?"

She had always liked him; in the old days he had been the only one whom she had allowed to know her as she really was, and now in the moment of forgetfulness of all that had happened since last they met, she was glad to see him, unfeignedly glad.

He stopped at the sound of her voice, a pleased smile crossing his face.

"Is that you, Bessie, here in the darkness?" he cried, "Dear child, how delicious it is to see you again!"

He leaned over, took her in his arms very tenderly, and kissed her upon the lips twice before releasing her.

"I am so glad, Lionel!" she cried, holding his hands closely. "It was very good of you to come 'way up here for the sole purpose of seeing me."

"Good? How absurd! Good to myself. I am afraid, dear, that the inclinations of Lionel Warrender are the only things that I consider very much now. Perhaps I never did anything else."

He sighed as he made the remark. The pleasure of the meeting was allaying, and he was going back again to the changed, grave man that he had become. He had lifted his hat, and the delightful breeze was playing through his blonde hair. Very handsome he looked there with the grey shadows gathering about him; and when is any woman ever indifferent to the sadness of a handsome man?

"If your inclinations led you here to me, I am glad, more than glad, that you followed them, Lionel," she said, gently. "Sit down, won't you?"

"Don't you think it is too damp here for you? The dew is falling."

"It is too delicious to go in," she answered, wishing to avoid the light. "Sit down here where I can touch you, where I can realize that I have you back."

"Then you have wanted me, Bessie? It is very good to feel that someone has. It is very good to know that someone has missed you."

"Why, Lionel, how sadly you speak! Has it turned out worse than you expected, dear? Is marriage more of a failure than you knew it would be?"

"Hush," he said, with painful effort. "We have no right to speak upon that subject. If my life is a failure, the fault is mine, and mine alone."

"Nonsense! A tender, generous woman can sweeten a man's life, no matter what it may be, if she but tries, unless he is a brute. You are surely not going to try to make me believe that you are that, Lionel?"

"I don't know. I only know that it has all been a mistake; that I wronged my wife when I married her, and that I have no right to expect anything different from what I receive. I feel like a cur to make even so much of a complaint as that. Please don't let us speak of it."

There was something of a pause; then she asked, quietly,—

"How is Violet?"

"Very well. I asked her to come up with me; but Mrs. Cass's little girl is dead, and she felt that she should not leave."

"Nina dead? I am very sorry. What was the cause?"

"Scarlet fever combined with pneumonia. It is very prevalent and fatal among children just now."

"And Norton, how is he?"

"Well, thank Heaven."

She put her hand out and touched his. It was trembling slightly.

"You love him very much, Lionel, do you

not?" she asked, her voice was very low and tender.

She could not see his face clearly, but she felt the quiver that passed over him.

"Very much," he answered, briefly.

"Lionel," she said, choosing her words carefully, "you and I have always been such good friends, have we not?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you remember the conversation we had in the conservatory that night when you proposed to Violet?"

He did not answer at once, and when he did, his voice was low.

"Yes."

"You did not love her. You would rather have shot yourself than have married her."

"I did not say that," he replied, evasively. "There may have been other reasons than want of love."

"Tell me that you do not wish me to speak to you of those old days, if you wish; but don't try to deceive me, Lionel. You did not love her; you don't love her now. Violet is beautiful; she is wealthy and accomplished. Why don't you love her?"

"Because my heart is dead and buried," he cried, passionately—"because when a man has loved once, and that love is still wildly alive in his heart— Good Heavens! what am I saying? Don't question me, Bessie, for Heaven's sake! I am not in a humour to lie, and I must not tell you the truth."

"But suppose I know," she cried, leaning forward and peering into his face in the darkness—"suppose I know why you love baby Norton? Oh, Lionel, my poor boy! I know what love is, and I can pity you from the very bottom of my soul!"

He bowed his head and kissed her hand.

"I might have known you would understand and pity me," he said, humbly; "you always did. You were always the best friend I ever had. I don't know why I should ever have hesitated to tell you the truth. But how did you know, dear? Who has told you this?"

"Perhaps I guessed it," she answered, evasively. "It is the loss of Norton's mother that has ruined your life, is it not?"

"The loss of her and the knowledge that I killed her," he cried, passionately.

She started violently.

"You killed her!" she gasped.

"Not with my hands, but with my stupid and unintentional cruelty. Heaven forgive me! Her death is upon my soul, and my punishment is ten thousand times worse than if they had hanged me for it!"

"You are mad!" she cried. "You don't know what you are talking of. Be quiet, Lionel. I did not know that I was touching a chord that would vibrate in a strain like that. Don't speak to me just yet; you don't know what you are saying. Why can't we all go on living for ever as peaceful as this silent night? Why must we needs suffer and groan under the afflictions that we have no power to control? Life is like nature, as they are a part of each other. We sit here and watch the moon rise in her gorgeous loveliness, here under these trees to-night, yet at this time to-morrow they may be bent and broken under the storm that Providence may see fit to send; and we cannot question His wisdom, can we? After all, how little it requires to make us happy! Now, if you could recall her back from the grave—back into your arms now, at this moment—you would call it bliss, would you not?"

She waited breathlessly for his answer. It did not come at once. His head was bent; his arms hung inertly between his knees. He remained so for some time. Then he lifted his head wearily.

"No," he answered, in a lifeless sort of way, "I would not recall her if I could. It would be madness. I loved her, but there are others to be considered—others to whom it would mean something worse than death."

"Do you mean my sister?"

"Not Violet alone, but others. Heaven knows I loved her, love her still, as I ever must, but if she stood there before me in the spirit world, and it required only the stretching forth of my hand to bring her back, I would not do it. I could not! I cannot make you understand, Bessie, but that which made me kill her with my cruelty exists yet, and I could not change it all by anything that I might do. Heaven help me! I must bear my burden as it is, though it may not be of my own making! but I can change and alter nothing—nothing! And I would not dare, even if I could."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Lionel Warrender was walking upon the terrace of Riverview. The delicious cigar he held between his lips seemed to afford him little enjoyment, if one could judge by the frown upon his brow. Both hands were thrust into the pockets of his trousers, and he puffed hard and fast, half blinding himself by the clouds of smoke that rolled through his blonde moustache.

He had been walking for some time with the same regularity of step and turning that marks the confined promenade of a caged animal, when a man came through the great gate just below, and paused for a moment to look at him.

The expression of the visitor's face was not pleasant as he recognised the walker. He did not pause long, but went quickly up.

"Halloo, Lionel!" he exclaimed, familiarly. "When did you come?"

He put out his hand, but instead of giving his in return, Lionel Warrender frowned and stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets.

"I was not aware that you were in this section of the country, or I should not have come at all," he said, coldly.

Harry Best smiled.

"That is not at all a polite greeting," he exclaimed, significantly. "I have always observed that politeness, like honesty, is the best policy, and, if followed from no other reason than policy, is better than if not followed at all."

"There can be no question of policy between you and me," returned Lionel, haughtily. "We are absolute strangers to each other, and as such must remain."

"You talk like a silly boy," said Best, with a slow, exasperating laugh. "One might fancy you one of the hotheads just relieved from the confines of the school-room. What you say is ridiculous. We could not be strangers to each other, even if both of us so desired. When was such a thing ever heard of? Why, my boy——"

"Be good enough to drop all that!" exclaimed Lionel, hotly. "If you have come here to see Miss Clifton, you will find her in the house. Your society is not agreeable to me."

Harry Best flushed angrily.

"Take care!" he cried; "you may have occasion to regret your language. I have not come to call upon Miss Clifton, but upon the young lady whom she calls her companion."

He spoke slowly and deliberately in order to watch the effect of his words upon Lionel, but, to his surprise, the young man was as indifferent as if he had spoken of Mary, the maid.

"You might have spared yourself the pains of a call at all, then," he said, carelessly. "The young woman has gone away."

"What!"

The word was more than an exclamation; it was a cry. It was ample proof to Best that what he had suspected was the truth. It was no plan of his to get Lionel Warrender into an affair of that kind. He had bent every energy of his life to making Mr. Warrender's heir the beacon light of London society—and now, just as the position was his, Best did not propose that it should be lost.

"Are you sure that she has gone?" he asked, after an awkward pause. "Did Bessie know that you were coming?"

"Miss Clifton did not expect me."

"But women are so infernally quick. Are you sure that she is not concealed in the house"

Lionel looked at him in very evident surprise.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he said, icily. "There is no reason why Miss Clifton should conceal anyone in her own house. She is her own mistress. Kindly let us put an end to this conversation; I have already told you that it is not agreeable."

"Oh, hang it! don't be a confounded ass!" exclaimed Best, shortly. "It doesn't make a bit of difference to me whether it is agreeable to you or not. I have spent the greater part of my life in trying to make something out of you, but you are such an infernal imbecile that you make it next to impossible for anyone to do it. You make a mess of everything, and seem to resent it as a heinous offence that I have endeavoured to prevent your being completely cut from that old blockhead's will. Most men would have let you take your own course, and starved."

"And why did not you?" asked Lionel, scornfully. "Because you knew that if that happened—if my father disinherited me—you could not be in possession of the fat income that supports you in the style of a prince. Don't talk sentimental rubbish to me, with an infernal pretence that you cared whether I was a beggar or not! If you would come out and say, like a man, that you did not propose to suffer beggary because of me, I should have infinitely more respect for you."

Best shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"There is something to be talked between us much more to the point than motives or sentimentalism of any kind," he said, with more earnestness than he had yet shown. "You are perfectly at liberty to call my interest into the matter selfish, if you so desire. That is a minor consideration. I don't propose to go to the workhouse because you are a fool, I can tell you!"

"Look here——"

"Now, don't interrupt me; I have got something to tell you that will interest you, in spite of all your tragedy airs. You remind me of a silly woman, Lionel. Listen to me. Do you know, I am afraid you are in the most—what shall I say?—deadly hole in which a man was ever placed!"

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you have not forgotten that Jew pawnbroker's daughter with whom you became involved, and——"

"If you dare to utter a word like that again regarding that lady, I shall forget that——"

He paused, his face grey as ashes with anger.

Best laughed mockingly.

"Why don't you complete your sentence?" he asked, jeeringly. "Come, boy; this is no time for us to quarrel. With your usual thick-headedness, I fear you did not take the proper precautions with that girl, and——"

"I have told you to leave her out of your conversation, or, by Heaven! I shall not be responsible for my acts! That lady is dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. I saw her buried."

"But might there not have been a mistake?"

"Certainly not!"

Harry Best heaved a very earnest and genuine sigh.

"I hope you are right," he said, "but I don't believe it."

Lionel started. For a moment it seemed to him that every drop of blood in his veins had grown stagnant. Best thought he was going to faint, and put his hand on the young man's shoulder to steady him. The touch recalled Lionel.

(To be continued.)

There is an hotel in New York nearly a quarter of a mile long.

NOW AND FOR EVER

(*Continued from page 513.*)

He had been possessed with the thought that Arthur had destroyed himself; but a man does not take the trouble to pack his clothes for that one last journey, when he would have to leave them all behind.

Harding held the light above his head, and looked round searchingly; but it was Lord Woodville who first caught sight of his son lying in a heap by the side of the half-filled trunk, his head resting on an old suit of dittoes.

"My boy! my boy!" broke from the father in a burst of almost uncontrollable emotion, as he tumbled on his knees beside him. "Tell the doctor—at once."

Harding hurried away, and presently came back with the old family doctor, Dr. Tomkins. He looked very grave, ordered the patient to be put to bed at once, and suggested further advice.

Lord Woodville conjured him to tell him the exact truth, when he confessed that he was afraid of acute inflammation of the brain.

"Is there any chance of recovery?" he asked, hoarsely.

"If he were to live, the chances are that he would be insane," and having delivered this terrible verdict he turned away.

Special messengers were sent after first-rate nurses and eminent doctors; and when all was done, the unhappy father retired to his own room, and looked himself in.

He thought of his dead brother, how furiously angry he used to be with him; he had shown him no compassion, he had never tried to help him; he had despised him for his weakness; he had scorned him for the disgrace he had brought upon the family name.

Perhaps if he had been kinder, gentler, more ready to help, and less willing to abuse, he might have saved that brother from a miserable life, and a still more miserable death. And then, when the curse fell upon his own son, he had shut his eyes to it for many years, and tried to ignore it, instead of grappling with it bravely.

And, oh! the fierce contempt with which he had lashed him on every recurring failure! Perhaps if he had combined more gentleness with his sternness; perhaps if he had used more constant method in his attempts to restrain him, the evil might have been stamped out before his son grew to manhood, and he might have been a blessing to his parents instead of a constantly recurring curse.

Arthur had no more patient or watchful nurse than his father during his brief tempestuous illness. For days he raved incessantly, and had to be held down by main force.

It was a very trying period for everyone, and Lady Woodville's face grew desperately sad and worn as time went on.

Ellice stayed at the Castle at her aunt's express desire; but her poor little white face touched the heart of every visitor who came to inquire, and happened to catch sight of her.

Bruin lingered between life and death for a fortnight; but later on, his strong, healthy nature triumphed over his weakness, and he began very slowly to mend.

Arthur woke one day from a long stupor, and looked up into his father's face with sad, but perfectly sane eyes.

"Bruin?" he asked, doubtfully, as if afraid of mentioning the name.

"Better, my boy, thank Heaven! and you are better too."

"I had such a horrid dream," he went on, in a low, weak voice. "I thought that I was in an awful rage, and took out a knife, and—but it isn't true, is it?" the perspiration standing out on his forehead, as a sudden fearful doubt of its being only a dream crossed his mind.

"Bruin shall come and show himself," Lord Woodville said, hurriedly. "I dreamt once that I had set fire to a bishop's lawn sleeves, but it had no foundation in fact. You go to sleep—but stop a bit, I believe you ought to have your medicine."

The nurse stepped forward, and put it to the patient's lips, whilst the Viscount hurried out of the room to spread the joyful news that the delirium had passed off.

After that, Arthur's strength rapidly declined, and everyone could see that the end was near. Bruin was wheeled into his room on a sofa, which was placed close to his bed, and the two cousins grasped each other's hands with silent affection.

Bruin had always stood by him through thick and thin, in spite of poor Emily Lennard's suspicions, and he owed him no grudge at all for that attempt on his life.

Arthur asked for the Rector to be sent for, and had many solemn talks with him, when he disburthened his heart of all its heavy weight.

He received the Holy Communion, and, after the storms of life, died in peace, with his mother's tears wet on his stern, white face.

* * * * *

Months passed away. Ellice took up the threads of her old life at home, but everyone saw that the girl was changed.

Lady Fitzeden thought it very natural that such a terrible fright as she had gone through in the summer-house should leave its stamp on a girl's spirits for some time afterwards, so she did not trouble herself much about it.

Arthur Standish was dead, so she could build no more matrimonial projects about him; and although Ellice had not enlarged about his delinquencies, she had heard quite enough about him from other sources to prove that he would never have made a fit husband for her beloved child. Indeed, she was rather glad that the Woodvilles had gone abroad, so that there would be no chance of another invitation to the Castle, and she hoped that Ellice would soon forget this one sad episode in her bright young life.

The Rector and his wife took quite a different view of the situation, and saw their way to amending it; but they meant to keep it a profound secret from everyone.

They sent out invitations for a small dance on Christmas Eve to celebrate Janet Belmont's birthday, and told Ellice she must be nice and come in good time, as they would expect her to help in setting everything going.

Lady Fitzeden, who was always anxious to promote her pleasure, ordered her a new gown for the occasion of pale pink chiffon, so that she might have nothing to remind her of that unlucky dance at the Castle, and sent her off punctually at eight, though the dancing was not to begin till half-past.

Ellice was feeling very sad as she arrived at the door of the Rectory. She considered herself quite a blighted being without an ounce of fun or flirtation left in her.

She hoped Janet and all her girl-friends would enjoy themselves, but as for herself, she never expected to do so again. In a listless manner she stepped out of the carriage, enveloped in white furs.

"Mistress is not down yet. Please, miss," began the neat parlourmaid, but before she could finish her sentence, a young man darted forward, and seized Ellice's small hand in both his own.

Before she knew who he was, he had drawn her into the Rector's own study, and was looking into her face with a pair of eager blue eyes, which could belong to nobody on earth but Bruin Standish.

"Well, have you quite forgotten me?" he asked, with a happy laugh.

"How did you come?" she asked breathlessly, as if she thought it could be by no ordinary means.

"By train, and by Mrs. Rector's own invitation, I assure you. Are you glad to see me? Why did you turn so cold and nasty all at once? I never could understand."

"I've been longing to tell you," she said, with glowing cheeks, whilst her pulses seemed to be dancing a galop.

"Then you've had wonderful self-control. But don't carry it on any farther. Why was it?" looking straight into her face.

Oh! it was so good to have him back, to hear his voice, to see his bonnie face, she could scarcely think of anything else.

"Was it because you found out that I was not Lord Woodville's son?" he said slowly.

Then she found her tongue. "No, of course not," with eager disdain. "Only that very night you—you——"

"Yes?" he said with a smile, for he knew that she was thinking of that interview in the conservatory.

"I heard voices under my window; and I could have sworn that one of them was yours, the other Miss Lennard's.

"Well, and what did I say? I should like to know."

"It was Arthur really—as I found out afterwards—and he said that he supposed he must make love to the little Fitzeden girl, as it was in the programme; and when Miss Lennard said it was too late—he said he didn't care a hang!"

"And you thought I could have talked like that after what I had said in the conservatory?" looking at her indignantly. "How could you think I was such a thorough-paced scoundrel?"

"But I didn't know you had a cousin—and the voice was yours."

"Extraordinary! We talked of him constantly."

"Not before me."

"Why didn't you come frankly to me next morning, and ask me about it?"

"There was nothing to ask—as I thought—and it seemed too horrid of you to be flirting out there with Miss Lennard when everyone else had gone to bed!"

"With Emily Lennard! Great Scott! Don't you know that she hates me? But just one other thing. Why did you let Arthur take you to that infernal summer house?"

"Oh! because I had a little hope. I had begun to think it was he on the terrace, and not you; and he promised to tell me all about it, if I went with him."

"My poor little girl," tenderly, "You ran an awful risk."

"I felt so frightened, but I had no peace till I knew," tears rushing to her eyes.

"Then you did care for me all through?"

"Most of all when I thought I had lost you," her cheeks covered with blushes.

His grasp tightened on her hands, and he drew a deep breath. "We will have no mistake this time," he said quietly, controlling himself as best he could. "I, Arthur Wentworth Standish—son of the late Wentworth Standish—ask you Ellice Fitzeden to be my wife. Don't say 'No,' whatever you do!"

She did not say "No." In fact she said nothing at all; but as she allowed him to draw her close to his throbbing heart, silence seemed to answer as well as speech.

* * * * *

It was a most successful party at the Rectory that night, and as the kind old Rector and his wife looked at Ellice's radiant face, they were positively bubbling over with satisfaction. Lady Fitzeden could positively not believe her eyes when Ellice walked in, an hour at least before she expected her to return home, followed by a good-looking young man.

It was quite enough to take her breath away to be told that this fascinating stranger had come to steal her child, and she felt almost inclined to refuse her consent when she found that he was the son of Wentworth Standish.

But in the course of a few days she got letters from Lord and Lady Woodbridge, giving a glowing account of their nephew, and telling her that they had always

looked upon him during poor Arthur's life as a younger but well-beloved son. Mr. and Mrs. Belmont were also loud in his praises; and told her that Mr. D——, one of the master's at Eton, had the highest opinion of his character as well as of his abilities; and the Dean of Christchurch, an old friend, wrote to congratulate Lady Fitzeden on her daughter's engagement to one of his most promising undergraduates, so that she was obliged to succumb.

That Christmas was the happiest that Ellice and Arthur ever had known, for it was the first, though not the last, that they ever spent together.

In the spring time they were married, and Lady Woodbridge looked ten years younger as she welcomed Bruin and his bride to their home in the Castle. All the sorrows of the past were buried in Arthur Standish's grave, and there seemed to be no cloud to mar the happiness of the future.

[THE END.]

FACETIÆ.

IT is always the man who doesn't shovel the dirt who is willing to give advice.

WHEN a fly lights on a piece of sticky paper he realizes that he is better off.

ALL the men who wear yachting caps are not yachting captains.

WHO uses all the snuff that is manufactured? No one nose.

A WORD to some young men—Negligé shirt doesn't necessarily mean neglected shirt.

"'My mother bids me bind my hair,' but my mother-in-law makes me tear it."

THE luckiest thing about the horseshoe over the door is that it doesn't drop on your head.

A MOTHER of six declares that people who say that boys know nothing about economy never saw them when they were using soap.

COUNTRY CHILD (who sees no novelty in a park): "What's all this grass for?" City Child: "That's to keep off of."

ONE of the extremes of misery is a small boy with a pair of new boots and no puddle to walk into.

TEACHER: "What great event occurred in 1882?" Small Boy (after a pause): "Please, ma'am, I was born then."

MODEST bearing is very commendable in a man; but it is no recommendation to a fruit-tree.

THERE is never so much excitement when a man begins to smell a rat as when a woman first sees a mouse.

TED: "He's full of impracticable ideas." Ned: "I should say he was. The only one of his schemes that didn't go up was a flying-machine."

"PAPA," said a boy, "I know what makes folks laugh in their sleeves!" "Well, my son, what makes them?" "'Cause that's where their funny bone is."

"SIMON! Simon! There are burglars in the house!" "That's all right, Mary. I made an assignment of everything, to-day, for the benefit of the creditors."

"NO," said one chicken to another, "we don't speak to her. She wasn't hatched from the same lot of eggs that we were." "Oh, I see. She from a different set."

WARMING the feet at the fender will cure headache, backache or joint ache; but another pair of feet must be alongside of them to cure a heartache.

"SIMON, my boy, you are now going to set up in business on your own account, and I wish to give you a bit of practical advice." "Well, father?" "When customers don't see what they want, teach them to want what they see!"

A WOMEN'S rights lady says that woman is a silent power in the land. To this a cynical old editor responds, "That will be news to thousands of husbands."

VERY KIND.—"Did they treat the chaperon kindly on that yachting trip?" "Oh, my! yes. Why, they let her have the yacht all to herself every time they made a port."

JEANNETTE: "Does Miss Boardman get her lovely complexion from her father or her mother?" Gladys (sweetly): "From her father. He's in the drug business."

"SAY, waiter!" exclaimed an impatient customer, "I've been here a full hour!" "I've been here since seven this morning," answered the waiter; "tiresome, ain't it."

A COMMERCIAL traveller comes up to the door of an omnibus. "Is Noah's Ark already full?" A voice from inside says, "No, come in, there is only a goose missing."

"You are an idiot!" angrily exclaimed a domineering wife. "So my friends said when I married you," replied the husband. And she became more infuriated than ever.

MR. CHALLEY (of the firm of Challey and Chintz): "Is our new bookkeeper a Christian, Mr. Chintz?" Mr. Chintz: "I can't tell yet. He hasn't had occasion to talk through the telephone."

"WHAT a beautiful new gown Jane is wearing. Did she bring it from abroad?" "No; it's her last season's dress; the dressmaker turned it inside out, and now she says it's from the other side."

YOUNG DE BINES: "You saw that lady—just passed us—well, young Smithers has kept up a flirtation with her for a month." The Major: "Do tell me all about it, that's a good fellow! She's my wife!"

LITTLE GIRL: "My papa has to get up awful early, so as to get to the office to see if his clerks is there attendin' to business." Little Boy: "My papa don't have to. He's one of the clerks."

JACK FORD: "Do you believe that a fellow ever did make a mistake and kiss the wrong girl in the dark, you know?" Tom De Witt: "No; how can a man kiss the wrong girl, anyhow?"

YOUNG MOTHER: "He is somewhat cross to-day. He is teething." Old bachelor (in great awe of the mite of humanity): "And when do you expect him to commence—er—commence hairing?"

A GOVERNESS in her advertisement stated that she was "complete mistress of her own tongue." "If that's the case," said a caustic old bachelor, "she can't ask too much for her services."

"I DON'T think my hair would stand on end if I were to see a ghost," remarked Miss Elder, after several spectral tales had been related. "Of course not," replied Miss Flypp. 'False hair is never affected that way."

TAPPER: "So you don't altogether like the new pastor's sermons, eh?" Dapper: "No, they are too profound—they necessitate too much headwork." "Quite true; I noticed you were nodding through his entire discourse yesterday."

ARTISTS BOTH.—Mrs. Smart: "Ah, good-morning, Mr. Dobber. I knew it was you. I saw you on the island, painting before your canvas." Mr. Dobber: "Oh, yes. At the same time I saw you in your room, painting before your mirror."

"IS it true that you have been saying that Schlankele here has stolen your purse?" "I did not go so far as to say that, your worship. All I said was that if Schlankele had not assisted me in looking for the purse, should have found it again."

"YES, sir; I can enlarge this photograph and give you a speaking likeness," said the artist. "A speaking likeness," said the widower, who has a very vivid remembrance of deceased. "I would like the portrait, but—but—I—er—don't care to have it talk much."

"FATHER," my boy is saying over his lesson books, "what is the meaning of the word fame?" "What little meaning the word has you will find in the dictionary, my son," I reply. "The thing itself is a kind of rind on the apple Happiness—the prettiest part of the fruit, and the least nutritious."

"WELL aunt, have your photographs come from Mr. Snappeschotte's?" "Yes; and they went back, too, with a note expressing my opinion of his impudence." "What was it?" "Why, on the back of every picture were these words, 'The original of this is carefully preserved.'"

"THERE'S just two ways of doing it," said a labourer to himself, as he stood musing and waiting for an employer. I must save me two thousand dollars. I must put away two hundred dollars a year for ten years, or tuck up twenty dollars a year for a hundred years! The last would be the easiest."

HISTORY is all the time having new readings, and some of the best of them come from the mouths of children. "When Rome was burning, the Emperor Nero was playing a fiddle," so the teacher told Robbie. And this was what Robbie told his mother that evening. "The Emperor Nero was playing a fiddle, so they burned Rome."

BELLE: "Oh, say, have you heard that May Savalle, who went as missionary to the Sioux, is going to marry a chief?" Blanche: "No! How did you hear?" "She told me so herself, and showed me her engagement ring. It has the cutest kind of a quotation inside it." "Really! What is the quotation?" "Lo, the bridegroom cometh!"

"HAVE you fixed up my will?" said the sick man to Lawyer Quilling. "Yes," "Everything as tight as you can make it?" "Entirely so." "Well, now I want to ask you something—not professional, but as a plain every-day man. Who do you honestly think stands the best show of getting the property?"

WIFE (from the window at one a.m., to tipsy husband): "Well, what's your excuse for coming home at this hour?" Husband: "Let me in, M'ria. Just come from the meeting of the labour union. Been considering what we'd do about the recent strike." Wife: "Well, you just sit down on the doorstep and consider what you'll do about the recent look-out."

SMITH: "Robinson was looking for you to-day, Brown. He leaves for the West to-morrow morning, where he intends to remain, and he wanted to collect that twenty-five pounds you owe him." Brown: "Yes, I saw him a little while ago. I promised to forward him the money next week." "In what part of the West does he intend to settle?" "I don't know. I didn't ask him."

WHITE LIES.—Frisky Spinster: "How many dances are you going to give me to-night, Captain Waxham? Captain Waxham: "Oh, I'm so sorry, but there's not enough men, you know, and I've just been told off by Mrs. Masham to dance with the girls—who—a—who are not likely to get partners! [Asks the girl just behind him for three waltzes and a polka.]

A NICE LEGAL POINT.—A negro whose bruised and swollen face and tattered clothing bore evidence of rough handling, recently limped into the presence of a Southern magistrate. "I wants you to arrest Sam Johnsing foh batt'ry, sah!" he exclaimed. "For assault and battery, you mean," suggested the dispenser of justice. "No, sah. Jess foh batt'ry, sah." "How can that be?" "Well, sah, it wuz jess dis way. Mah mawl bruk inteh Johnsing's cohn patch, an' w'en Johnsing druv 'im hum he call me a no good, fool niggah." "Yes." "I w'an't gwine to stan' dat nohow, so I ups an goff him a whack wif a fence stake, sah." "Why, then you assaulted him!" "Yes, sah. I did, sah. But he done de batt'ry. He mos' battered de life outen me, sah."

SOCIETY.

One of the latest feminine fads is to have the hand or the arm modelled in plaster or sculptured in the whitest of white marble.

The wearing of a single diamond star above the forehead has become quite general now, and other odd ornaments of the same style are seen frequently.

There is every indication that long cloaks are coming in again. Short jackets, three-quarter length coats and capes, and the sacque-backed garment of all sorts of lengths have evidently had their day for the present.

The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh will be abroad for very nearly two months. Their Royal Highnesses are now very popular indeed at Devonport, but the Duchess does not like the place and finds her house there much too small and inconvenient.

It is announced, with reserve, that a marriage is being arranged between the young King of Servia and a Russian Grand Duchess. The marriage, it is added, will be celebrated before the King attains his majority.

The investigators of the manners and customs of Adam and Eve seem never at rest, but the latest and quaintest idea is that the name Eve is derived from a word meaning "talk," and that therefore women are likely always to continue to talk more than men.

The Queen, who usually suffers more or less in the summer from languor, insomnia, and general *malaise*, is quite exceptionally well this season, and is looking forward with keen pleasure to quite a succession of visitors at Balmoral during the coming three months.

It seems a little odd to think that Mrs. Amelia Bloomer is still alive, a gentle little old lady, in good health, at Council Bluffs, in Iowa, where she has lived for the past thirty-five years, having celebrated her golden wedding there in 1890. Mrs. Bloomer was not the first lady to wear the hybrid costume identified by her name, but she was the first to take up the cudgels for it in the Press—but for all that, she only wore it for five or six years.

The Queen on an average spends about two months at Osborne in the winter, dating from about December 20th to about February 20th; a month or so on the Continent in the spring; a month at Balmoral at the end of May and beginning of June; about a month at Osborne at the end of July and beginning of August; and from two months and a-half to three months at Balmoral in the autumn, commencing from about the third week in August.

The Queen of the Belgians is the latest recruit to photography, and pursues her studies in that art with the utmost diligence. One of the most eminent Brussels photographers goes down to Ciergnon twice a-week to give her lessons, and up to the present "develops" all the "plates," but her Majesty hopes to dispense with his aid before the end of the season. Her husband entertains a special dread of the camera in general, and the obtrusive "kodak" in particular, but he has been induced to give a sitting to the Queen, who has executed an excellent portrait of him.

When the Princess Elizabeth, afterwards Queen, came forth from her confinement in the Tower, November 17th, 1558, she went into the church of All Hallows, Staining, the first church she found open, to return thanks for her deliverance from prison. As soon as this pious duty was performed the Princess and her attendants went to the "King's Head" in Fenchurch-street to take some refreshment, and there her Royal Highness dined on pork and peas. The dish from which she ate her dinner still remains affixed to the kitchen dresser there.

STATISTICS.

There are 125 varieties of strawberries.

The greatest distance covered by a steam-vessel in one hour's run is fixed at twenty-six miles.

British property to the amount of nearly two hundred million pounds passes the Rock of Gibraltar every year.

It is estimated that 22 acres of land are necessary to sustain one man on flesh meat. The same space of land, if devoted to wheat culture, would feed 42 people; if to oats, 88; potatoes, Indian corn, and rice, 176; and if to the plantain or bread-tree, over 6 000 people.

It has been calculated that the hair of the beard grows at the rate of 1½ lines a week. This will give a length of 6½in. in the course of a year. For a man 80 years of age no less than 27*ft.* of beard must have fallen before the edge of the razor.

GEMS.

Consider what God can do and you will never despair of success.

Secrecy is the element of all goodness; even virtue, even beauty is mysterious.

Work is the grand cure for all the maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind—honest work, which you intend getting done.

Without tact you can learn nothing. Tact teaches you when to be silent. Inquirers who are always inquiring never learn anything.

Life is so complicated a game that the devices of skill are liable to be defeated at every turn by air-blown chances, incalculable as the descent of thistledown.

Words, money, all things else, are comparatively easy to give away, but when a man makes a gift of his daily life and practice, it is plain that the truth, whatever it may be, has taken possession of him.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

Vegetable-Marrow Jam.—Peel some marrows and remove the seeds; cut them into small pieces. Boil them with an equal weight of sugar until the marrow is transparent. Flavour with ginger or lemon.

Potato Fritters.—Take four cold mealy potatoes, crumble them through a sieve, and beat up well with two tablespoonfuls of cream; add salt and pepper and chopped parsley. Bind the mixture with an egg well beaten, then make into small cakes, and fry in boiling butter or lard. Serve very hot, garnished with chopped capers.

Fruit and Rice Pudding.—Wash one pound of rice and tie in a cloth, allowing room for it to swell, and put it into a saucepan of cold water; let it boil for an hour, or longer if necessary; then take it up, untie the cloth, and stir in one pound of any sort of fresh fruit; tie up again, and return to the saucepan for another hour. Serve with sweet sauce, or plain brown sugar and a little milk.

Fricasseed Eggs.—Boil some eggs hard; cut them across, remove the yolks, rub them to a paste with some pounded cold meat, chicken, tongue, or ham, finely chopped parsley, a little melted butter, made mustard, and plenty of pepper and salt. Fill the whites with the mixture, rounding it at the top; stand them close together in a baking-dish strewed with breadcrumbs and slightly buttered. Heat some thick stock or gravy with chopped parsley and chives, plentiful seasoning; when it boils, thicken with flour or a dessertspoonful of cream. Pour it over the eggs. Stand the dish for one minute in a hot oven, and serve at once.

MISCELLANEOUS.

No British sovereign has vetoed a parliamentary bill during the past 185 years.

The charter of the City of London, dated 1079, is in existence at the present day.

The muddy water of the Nile is clarified by rubbing bitter almonds on the sides of the water-vessels.

The Roumanian crown is made of metal from the cannon that were captured from the Turks by the Roumanians at Plevna in 1877.

A parrot is said to have lived in the Zoological Gardens, Regent's Park, for fifty-two years without a drop of water.

Loaded dice have been discovered among the ruins of Pompeii; the art of cheating at play would therefore appear to be of considerable antiquity.

Amongst savages short sight is unknown, their condition of life rendering good sight nearly as essential as the possession of four limbs.

A railway bridge is at length to cross the Niagara Falls. Every kind of novelty has been suggested with regard to the Falls, but none have been a success.

Although the northern shores of the Mediterranean abound in anchovies, sardines, and pilchards, its ports absorb nearly all the pilchards that Cornwall can send them.

There are few uncracked walls in Essen, Germany. The testing of the big guns manufactured by Krupp has shaken the foundations of the most of the houses, and keeps glaziers busy.

The metropolis never contains more food than is sufficient for two days' consumption. Were the railways to be cut off, in less than a fortnight it would be suffering from the extreme agonies of famine.

Bees are said to have such an antipathy to dark-coloured objects that black chickens have been stung to death, while white ones of the same brood were untouched, and a man in a black high hat is rarely stung on account of the attention the bees give to the hat.

When an Egyptian dog wishes to drink at the Nile he goes a short distance up the river and howls for some time. The crocodiles, being attracted by the sound, immediately crowd to the place, while the dog hastily runs to the part which the crocodiles have left and drinks in safety.

The largest church in Europe is at St. Petersburg. It was begun in 1771, and in twenty years 2 000 men had not finished the walls. It is of polished marble, both outside and in. The pillars are of one piece, fifty feet high, the base and capitals of solid silver; but the greatest curiosity of all is a wooden box, constructed to cover it from the weather.

Massowah, on the shores of the Red Sea, has an average temperature for the month of May of 99 degrees Fahrenheit, and even in midwinter the thermometer is said to rise frequently to over 100 degrees in the shade. A naval officer says the hottest town in India is nothing to Aden, while Aden's heat is mild to that of Massowah. It was at Massowah that James Bruce, the famous eighteenth-century traveller, was astonished to find the heat had made his sealing-wax more fluid than tar.

Mexican theatres have a custom which might be tried to good purpose in England. The patrons pay for one act at a time. If they wish to keep their seats after the first act, collectors are sent round for the next instalment. This makes it possible for the pleasures of a play to last all the week by seeing one act each night. One additional feature should be added. The performance ought to begin with the first act the first night, the second act the second night, and so on in rotation. This would enable people who do not like to remain out late to see the play on the instalment plan without discomfort.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

KING-MAKER.—Warwick is a borough.

SHAH.—The capital city of Persia is Teheran.

W. T.—We have never heard of any injury arising from their use.

TROUBLED.—The only way is to keep the hair cut close for a year or two.

IN DISTRESS.—All goods found on the premises may be seized, except what belongs to lodgers.

FANNY.—The steamship *London* foundered January 11, 1866.

JUDY.—Abergavenny is a town in Monmouthshire, an English county.

NELSON.—Sixteen and a half is the limit of age for entering the navy as a boy.

SWEET-TOOTH.—Fresh ripe fruit is most wholesome, but, as you say, jam in moderation is not injurious.

W. H. L.—Wainwright was executed, for the murder of Harriet Lane, December 21, 1875.

BRENDA.—Your writing is so bad, and your question so confused, that we really cannot understand it.

GUSTAVUS.—In menageries giraffes are fed on grain, Indian corn, carrots, and hay.

SUFFERING ONE.—The only cures for a tooth which ashes are either extraction or stopping.

PAT.—The population of the whole of London is 4,211,452; and that of Ireland is 4,706,162.

H. C.—It is a hard case, but the truth is, no part of the purchase money is returnable.

VEXED MOTHER.—You are not liable at all for the window which your son, a boy of five, assisted to break.

INNOCENCE.—In a limited company the liability of the shareholders is limited to the amount of their shares.

EDWIN.—We know of no railway station with a larger covered area than that at New Street, Birmingham.

FRECKLES.—A preparation made of two-thirds lemon juice to one-third Jamaica rum will remove freckles.

SOPHY.—Soda is the best thing for cleaning tinware; apply it with a damp cloth and rub well, then wipe dry.

MY LADY.—To whiten the nails, cut a lemon in two and rub in well at night. Wash off in warm water the next morning.

A MARTYR.—It is merely a nervous condition, and medicine cannot help you. You must overcome it by your own will.

BOBBY.—We are of opinion that the advertiser is merely a money lender, not one whit better than the rest.

INQUIRER.—Petersburg is 154 miles north of Adelaide; it is also called Yongala Junction; important railway town.

A YOUNG HOUSEKEEPER.—Prick potatoes before baking so that the air can escape. This will prevent their bursting in the oven.

E. P.—Edward Young, the author of "Night Thoughts," died in the midst of his literary employments, at the age of eighty-four.

DICK.—When two sentences run "concurrently," the prisoner has to serve the longest period named, and this covers both sentences.

A. B.—The coins would not now pass as current money; as for their fancy value it would be trifling, but a dealer might buy them.

IN STRAITS.—Have nothing to do with money-lenders, especially when they begin by asking a fee for inquiries; they mean to grab the money and refuse the loan.

VIC.—Whoever tells you that comb-honey is made by machinery or by any other means or process except by the bees themselves is either ignorantly or wilfully misstating facts.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.—You should confide your case to your mother. She is the most proper person, and in every way the best person, for you to confide in in such a case.

SEA-SIDE.—For the skins which easily get sunburnt the following lotion is excellent to wash the face, neck, and hands: A tumbler of lemon juice, two pints of rain water, five drops of essence of roses. Try it.

MARELLE.—For those who have a greasy skin, a good thing is to wash it once a week with wine—red wine preferred. The Germans formerly were much given to washing the face with the scum of beer, and they are noted for their beautiful complexions.

ONE IN TROUBLE.—The young man who "is going to marry another girl" is not worth troubling yourself about. Let him go, and let him marry whomsoever he may please—except yourself. No woman should wish to marry a man who has proved to her that he is a liar.

DISPUTANT.—The authorship of the line:

"The conscious water saw its God and blushed,"

which was written in regard to the miracle at Cana, is ascribed to Milton and also to Dryden, the advocates of each being equally certain that they are right.

C. C.—The leaves of geraniums are an excellent application for cuts, where the skin is rubbed off, and other wounds of that kind. One or two leaves must be bruised, and applied on linen to the part, and the wound will become cicatrised in a very short time.

MRS. SMITH.—A landlord has no more right to enter a house without knocking at the door than any other person, unless he comes to levy a distress.

OLD MAID.—A little glycerine, diluted with fresh lime or lemon juice, will whiten the skin. Apply at night and wash off in the morning with rose-water.

STEWARD.—Trust money is money left in the trust or care of certain persons, called trustees, to be used by them in the interest of persons named by the testator.

O. A.—George Payne Rainsford James, the English novelist, died in Venice on June 9, 1860. Over eighty original works were published by him. Among the novels suggested by his experiences of American life and history were "Ticonderoga" and "The Old Dominion."

A WRETCHED LOVER.—You are not entitled to know whether the lady loves you or not, unless you are willing to commit yourself by asking the inevitable question. Tell her of your own love, and ask her to be your wife. You will then be able to get at something definite and tangible.

IMPATIENCE.—We do not clearly understand what you mean by making a person active. If you mean to cure a habit of laziness, there is probably nothing but to interest or shame the individual out of it. If it is a young person, some congenial occupation might have the desired effect. With older people, probably, it is a hopeless case.

WHAT MY LOVER SAID.

By the merest chance, in the twilight gloom,
In the orchard path he met me—
In the tall wet grass, with its faint perfume,
And I tried to pass, but he made no room;
Oh, I tried but he would not let me.
So I stood and blushed till the grass grew red,
With my face bent down above it,
While he took my hand, as he whispering said—
How the clover lifted its sweet pink head,
To listen to all that my lover said!
Oh, the clover in bloom! I love it.

In the high wet grass went the path to hide,
And the low wet leaves hung over,
But I could not pass on either side,
For I found myself, when I vainly tried,
In the arms of my steadfast lover.
And he held me there and he raised my head,
While he closed the path before me;
And he looked down into my eyes and said—
How the leaves bent down from the boughs o'erhead
To listen to what my lover said!
Oh, the leaves hanging lowly o'er me!

I am sure that he knew when he held me fast
That I must be all unwilling;
For I tried to go, and I would have passed,
As the night was come with its dews at last,
And the sky with its stars was filling.
But he clasped me close when I would have fled,
And he made me hear his story.
And his soul came out from his lips and said—
How the stars crept out when the white moon fled
To listen to all that my lover said!
Oh, the moon and the stars in glory!

I know that the grass and the leaves will not tell,
And I am sure that the wind, precious rover,
Will carry his secret so safely and well
That no being shall ever discover
One word of the many that rapidly fell
From the eager lips of my lover.
And the moon and the stars that looked over
Shall never reveal what a fairy-like spell
They wove round about us that night in the dell,
In the path through the dew-laden clover;
Nor the whispers that made my heart to swell,
As they fell from the lips of my lover.

BETTY.—The cheapest and surest remedy for either hard or soft corns is turpentine. If a little of this is rubbed on a corn every evening for about two weeks the corn and roots will both come entirely out and will not reappear in any form. If the turpentine runs on to the adjoining skin it will cause a little soreness, but otherwise the remedy is as painless as it is efficient.

LOVER OF HISTORY.—Out of 2,540 emperors and kings ruling 60 nations, 229 were dethroned, 64 abdicated, 20 committed suicide, 11 went mad, 100 died on the battlefield, 123 were made prisoners, 25 were pronounced martyrs and saints, 157 were assassinated, 61 were poisoned, and 108 sentenced to death; total, 963. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

NIGHTINGALE.—Fine voices are seldom found in a country where fish or meat diet prevails. Those Italians who eat the most fish, those of Naples and Genoa, have few fine singers among them. The sweet voices are found in the Irish women of the country, and not of the towns. Norway is not a country of singers, because they eat too much fish; but Sweden is a country of grain and song. The carnivorous birds croak; grain-eating birds sing.

ELSIE.—The cause of the opal being deemed an unlucky gem is probably due to the nature of the stone itself. The iridescence of the opal is caused by innumerable minute cracks, which reflect the light from a thousand surfaces and so induce the play of colour. It sometimes happens that, from no known reason, the cracks enlarge and the stone splits into a number of pieces. A valuable opal has thus been known to become utterly worthless in a short time, and of a beautiful gem only a thimbleful of fragments remained.

A. B.—If the rent is owing to you, of course you can summons the man.

COUNTRY LASS.—Write to Mr. Hart, music publisher, Paternoster-row, E.C., for a list of his publications.

IGNORANCE.—The Garter motto is in old French, and means "evil be to him who evil thinketh."

ANXIOUS.—You can do nothing except assert your claim as forcibly as possible, and back it up as strongly as you can.

ESAU.—Some people have hair on the face much sooner than others, and there is nothing that will prevent it while from growing.

BROTHER-IN-LAW.—No, the Bible merely forbids a man to marry as a second wife the sister of his first wife the latter is still alive.

KATHLEEN.—Her Majesty was proclaimed Empress of India at Delhi, January 1, 1877, during the Viceroyship of the late Earl of Lytton.

PETER PIPER.—The most brilliant comet about the time mentioned was Donati's famous comet of 1858. The tail was estimated to be 40,000,000 miles long.

BERT.—You are wrong and the secretary is right. He is quite entitled to keep all the books, and can sue you if you do not pay up the arrears.

VIOLINIST.—Antonio Stradivari (or Antonius Stradivarius), the famous violin maker, was born in 1649 or 1650 (said to be at Cremona) and died in 1737.

MALICE.—It is neither fair nor honourable to send post cards to anyone with matter written upon them that is calculated to injure them in any way.

O. A.—The mail goes out from London to Cape Town once a week on Friday morning; to the West Coast of Africa and Abyssinia every Friday evening.

IN A FIX.—A lodger's goods are protected from distraint for his landlord's rent. If the goods are seized, an order may be obtained for their recovery.

VIOLET.—Wash your head occasionally with a little borax in the water; that will not only loosen the scurf but soften the hair as well.

FLORA.—A florist says that the law governing the colouring of flowers makes a blue rose impossible. According to this law, the three colours, red, blue, and yellow, never all appear in the same species of flowers; any two may exist, but never the third. Thus we have red and yellow roses, but no blue; red and blue verbenas, but no yellow; yellow and blue in the various members of the viola family, as pansies, for instance, but no red; red and yellow gladiola, but no blue, and so on.

SCHNIRAMIS.—We have reason to believe that the Queen has decided that she will not herself hold any more Drawing Rooms, but will in future delegate that work to the Princess of Wales. The Queen never holds a Drawing Room now without afterwards feeling very tired and much out of sorts, and she usually suffers from a sick headache for some hours after leaving the Throne Room. There is no reason whatever why the Queen should continue to hold Drawing Rooms when they involve such physical discomfort to her.

BERTHA.—The custom of placing crape on the door of a house where there has been a recent death had its origin in the ancient English heraldic customs and dates as far back at least as the year 1100 A.D. At that period hatchments or armorial ensigns were placed in front of houses when the nobility and gentry died. These hatchments were of diamond shape and contained the family arms quartered and coloured with sable in such a manner that the spectator at a glance could tell what branch of the family was dead, whether the deceased was young or old, married or single, widow or widower.

UNDECIDED.—It is impossible to make any iron-clad rules when Cupid is in question. Men and women have become engaged after what would really be but a few hours' acquaintance. They have married and lived long and happily together. Others, after long acquaintance and almost endless engagements, have been wedded and lived like the proverbial cat and dog. So you see the duration of either the acquaintance or the courtship proves nothing conclusively. Still, most persons advise at least a year of engaged life. If you are very fond of some one, and the sentiment is reciprocated, become engaged, if you think best. But, whatever you do, let all be well understood. Have no concealments, no private understandings. Anything as important as a life-partnership should have time and opportunity for deliberation and counsel. Haste, rashness and concealment are plants that bear an enormous crop of unhappiness and discord, and often disgrace.

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